The girl in the battered black sedan couldn't guess the evil shadow on her trail. . . "Perilous Escort," HELEN REILLY

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Short Stories

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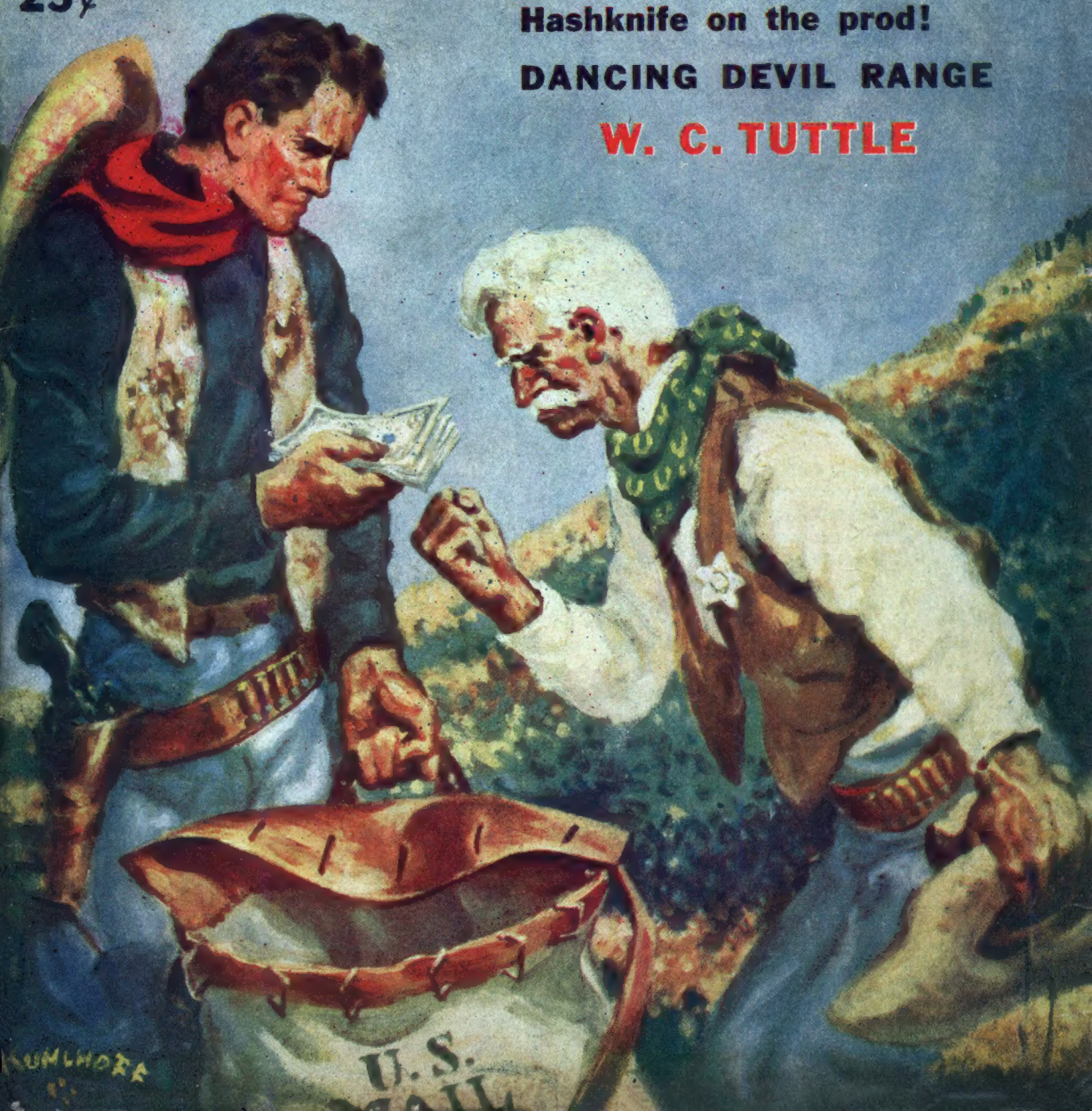
Hashknife on the prod!

DANCING DEVIL RANGE

W. C. TUTTLE



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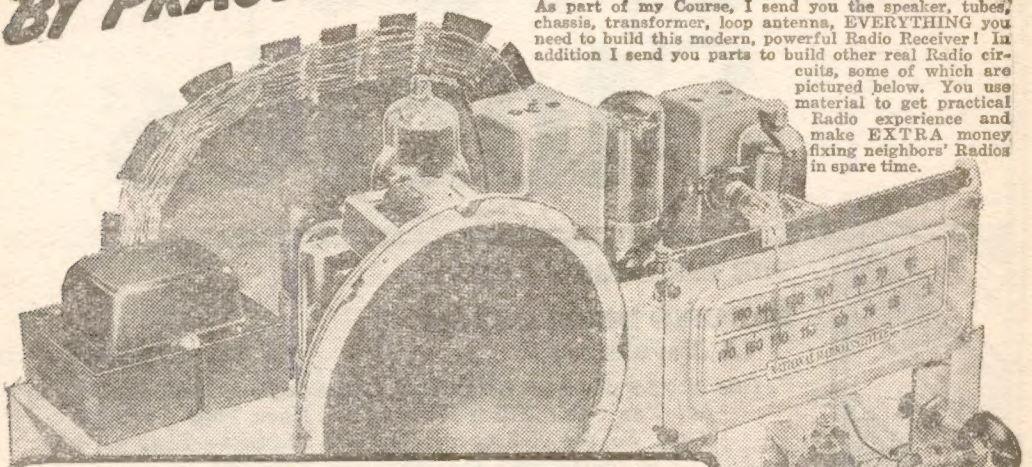

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Short Stories

TWICE A MONTH

THE BEST OF AMERICA'S ACTION ADVENTURE MYSTERY

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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20. N. Y., and entered as second-class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $6.50; and to all other countries, $6.60. Price payable in advance. October 25, 1948 Vol. CCVI, No. 2. Whole Number 1026.

EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

October 25th, 1948

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES NO REPRINTS

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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

Killing the Golden Goose

THE hunting season's just around the corner, so how about a new rifle or shotgun and a load of ammunition? Oh brother, if you are thinking along these lines I hope that hip pocket where the wallet rests is a-saggin' at least to the knee! For if you haven't taken a look lately at the price tags you have an unpleasant surprise coming!

Strange as it may seem, hunting rifles are far from plentiful. Somebody must have dough, for rifles and shotguns are bought up as fast as they appear on the dealers' shelves. At this writing (August) ammunition seems to be in fair supply. Of course, by the last of October certain popular calibers will no doubt be on the hard-to-find list.

But, regardless of the supply and demand, the high prices that the sportsman has to pay for these items is what gives me a big bellyache in the pocketbook, where it hurts worse!

In 1940 a box of twenty .30-30 cartridges could be bought for $1.46, and if the hunter got around a bit he, now and then, could get 'em at the bargain counter for as low as a buck. Early in 1948 they cost $2.16. Now (the price has just taken another jump) twenty of these, one of our most popular cartridges will set you back about $2.43.

In 1940 a box of 20 .30-06 cartridges sold for $2.10. Now they're around $3.16.

That excellent and justly popular .22 Hornet cartridge, which has been the woodchucker's pal ever since it was developed, has also felt the effects of inflation, and how! Before the war, a box of fifty listed at $1.69 and some chain stores sold them for as low as $1.35. Now the retail price is at $4.20 for the same box of fifty.

Speaking of the Hornet, before the war I bought Remington hollow and soft-point 45-grain bullets for eighty cents a hundred. Primers cost $2.65 per 1,000, and Hercules #2400 powder was $1.50 per pound. Using fired cases, the most expensive component in making cartridges, my reloaded Hornet ammo cost me around sixty-four cents for fifty.

Now, with available 45-grain Speer bullets cost $2.80 per 100, and primers at $6.50 per 1,000, and #2400 powder at $2.00 per pound, the reloader, by using his fired cartridge cases, may roll his own for about $1.86 for fifty. This is quite a saving for the fellow who does much shooting, especially when we consider that the factory stuff has been jacked up to $4.20 for the same number.

Savings in about the same proportions may be realized by the reloader with other calibers.

The very popular .22 Long Rifle cartridge which is consumed in huge quantities by target shooters and plinkers was listed in 1940 at thirty-four cents for a box of fifty (target shooters generally got them for $5.00 per 1,000) now they bring about sixty cents a box!

How about shotgun fodder? In 1940 a box of 25 long-range 12-gauge shells listed at $1.32. Now we'll shell out about two and a half bucks for 'em! Wow!

Standard 12-gauge skeet shells now list for about $2.14 for a box of 25. Eight years ago they sold for under a dollar, and could be bought for as low as seventy-eight cents. No wonder the regular shooters, as well as the now and then boys, at the skeet clubs are numbering fewer and fewer.

For the reloader we find that, generally speaking, ammunition components (with the exception of powder) have increased in price up to about 100 percent.

Now, how about the guns for shooting this high-priced fodder? Hold your hats, boys, here we go again!

Before the war, Winchester's best bolt-action high-power rifle, the Model 70, in Standard Grade sold for $61.80, with the Super Grade bringing $98.87. Now the Standard Grade brings $106, and the De Luxe $166.65, with plenty of takers, as we seldom see these guns in display cases.

The Winchester Model 94 Lever-action repeating carbine, our old favorite deer rifle, is now selling for $56.50 according to my latest price list, which may be somewhat out of date, as yesterday I saw one of these carbines with a $59.50 price tag on it. Eight or nine years ago the list price for this fine little rifle was $30.27. Even at the latest price, this gun seems to be about the best buy in the big game (deer) rifle class.

The Winchester Model 52 .22 caliber target rifle (the target puncher' delight) with Lyman sights now reduces the bankroll by $95.05 against $62.66 in 1940.

The Remington Model 81 Woodsmaster Autoloading Rifle in Standard Grade was $70.50, now $120.

The Savage lever-action high-power rifle Model 99-EG which was $53.50 is now $88.80.

Custom- or semi-custom-made high-power rifles made up on Springfield, Enfield or Mauser actions may be purchased for anywhere from $150, on up to anything the bank account will stand, depending on the specifications.

The Remington Autoloaler, Model 11, Standard Grade which was $52.42 is now an even $94.

In the handgun department we find that in 1940 the Colt Officer's Model Target Revolver (heavy barrel) was priced at $41.75. Now in 1948 it's $65. The Smith & Wessen M&P Target Revolver was $38. Now the corresponding gun, the K-38 Target is $65. In looking over the prices of handguns, it seems that the percentages of increase in prices may not be quite as much as with some of the long guns. Maybe it's on account of the fact that the price of steel is quite high and there is less of this precious metal in the smaller pieces. I dunno!

Kidding to one side, I could go on listing these increases 'til the cows come home, but what's the use anyway? All of these prices may have changed by the time you read this—but you get the idea.

The gun and ammo-making boys seem to be piling it on pretty heavy. And after all, there's such a thing as pricing a product right out of the market.

I know that there are several guns I wanted to buy this year, but at current prices it's no soap for me, even if I had the dough!

—⊕—

Springfields and Enfields

THE latest dope on the sale of Springfield and Enfield .30-'06-caliber service rifles to National Rifle Association members, by the Director of Civilian Marksmanship, Department of the Army, is that orders accepted up to the first of the year are still being processed. There is good likelihood that all of these sales will be taken care of before the year is out, and the D. C. M. will be in a position to accept new orders within several months.

The best buys are the rifles indicated as unserviceable. The Springfield in this category sells for $15, and the Enfield for $5, plus a small fee for handling and packing. These rifles are as is, and are supposed to have excessive headspace (a dangerous condition). I have examined several rifles indicated as having excessive headspace, and have checked them using reliable headspace gauges. None of the ones I looked over would accept the field gauge (1.950 inch) and all seemed to be in quite good condition.

I bought one of the five-dollar Enfields and have fired about a hundred rounds through it with good accuracy. This rifle has a two-groove Johnson barrel, and I expect it to make up into a fine sporter.

DANCING DEVIL RANGE

By
W. C. TUTTLE

A LONG, dusty freight train rattled and clanked through the desert hills, seemingly in no hurry to get anywhere. Outside it was almost dark, and there were no lights inside the caboose, where Hashknife Hartley sprawled on an uncomfortable seat and gazed wearily through a dusty window. Across the aisle was Hashknife's partner, Sleepy Stevens, stretched out on the seat, his head pillowed on his war-sack.

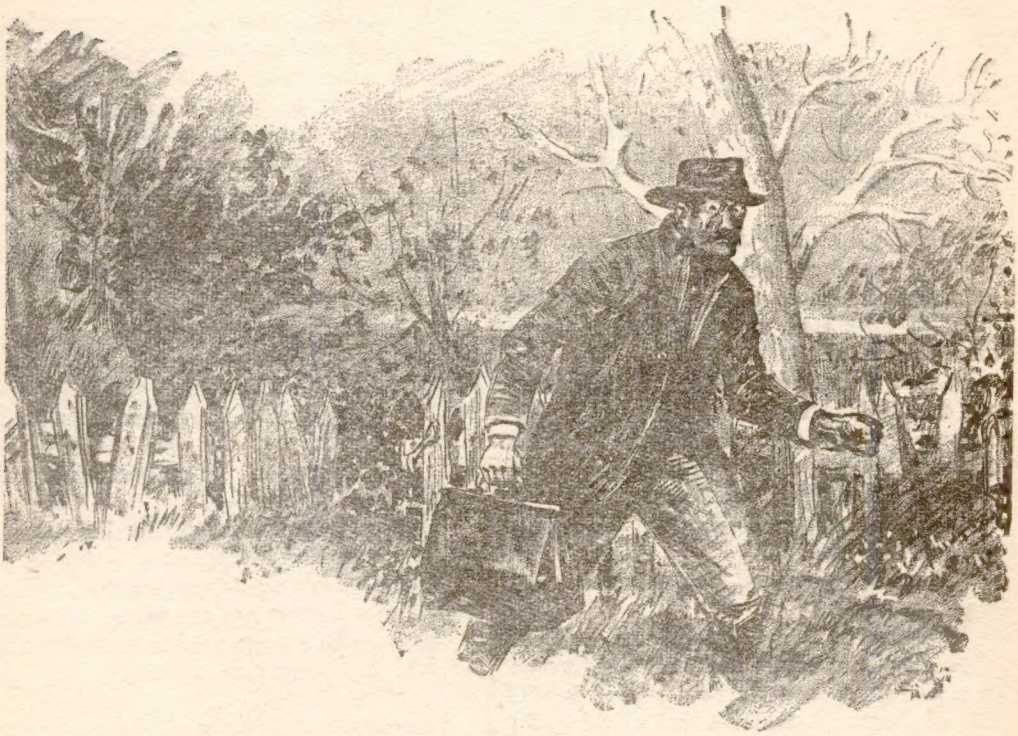
Hashknife was inches over six feet tall, of slender, steel-muscled manhood, his sombrero pulled low over his gray eyes. Sleepy Stevens was less than six feet tall, broad of shoulder and beam, slightly bow-legged. Sleepy had a grin-wrinkled face, wide mouth and innocent-looking blue eyes, which seemed amazed at the world.

In garb they were merely a pair of drifting cowboys; well-worn Stetsons, colorless shirts, stringy vests, little more than a depository for tobacco and papers, faded overalls and high-heel boots. There was nothing fancy about these two cowpokes. Their gun-belts were home-made, form-fitted by wear, and even their Colt guns, tucked into short holsters, had plain wooden butts, blackened by wear.

A sleepy-eyed brakeman climbed down from the cupola and wiped a grimy forearm across his dusty eyes and lighted his lantern. He said, "We're pullin' into Northgate, boys."

Sleepy swung around on the seat, yawned widely and picked up his war-sack. The train was slowing down, as they came out on the platform. Each one of them picked

Hashknife Wasn't Exactly the Size and Shape to Play Santa Claus; Still and All, Peace on Earth Was a Long Way from Dancing Devil Valley That Particular Season



up a heavy saddle and stepped down. There were few lights in Northgate, the railroad point for all of the Dancing Devil range.

There were huge loading corrals along the tracks, indicating that much livestock was shipped from Northgate. The train stopped, with the caboose close to the depot, and the two men swung down. The conductor crossed in front of them, going into the depot, where a kerosene lamp yellow-lighted the windows. A man came from the near corner of the depot, walking swiftly toward the rear platform of the caboose.

He had just reached the steps and was about to enter the caboose, when a shotgun blasted from down behind the loading platform. The man twisted around, tried to grasp the doorway, but missed, and went backwards off the platform, falling in the middle of the tracks behind the caboose.

Hashknife and Sleepy dropped their impedimenta and ran over to the caboose. There was no sign of the shooter. The conductor, depot-agent and a brakeman came running. They picked the man up and placed him on the platform while Hashknife told them where the shot came from. There was no one in sight. The victim had stopped a dozen buckshot, and was beyond any medical assistance.

There was no law officer in Northgate, the sheriff's office being at Tomahawk Flats, thirty miles south, center of the Dancing Devil range. Someone summoned a doctor, and other curious people arrived. A cowboy said, "I know who he is—he's Oren Blakely. I think he worked for the Circle H, down at Tomahawk Flats."

Hashknife and Sleepy secured a room at a little hotel, and, after considerable haggling, bought two horses from the man who owned the livery-stable and feed corral. They told him they were leaving for Tomahawk Flats in the morning. He said, "if yo're lookin' for work down there—"

"What about it?" asked Hashknife quickly.

"I just meant that they prob'ly ain't lookin' for cowpokes. Yuh see, the bank went busted and that busted most of the cowmen, makin' things kinda bad down there. If a feller was lookin' for work—But that's yore business."

"Much obliged," said Hashknife, but he didn't say whether it was for the advice or the information.

OVER at the hotel they heard a man say that they had sent for the sheriff and the coroner. Another man said, "It ain't goin' to be a very merry Christmas down there this year."

In their little room, Hashknife sprawled on the bed, smoking a cigarette, while Sleepy looked moodily from a dusty window. Sleepy said, "I just hope we ain't playin' Sandy Claws for Bob Marsh."

Hashknife laughed shortly. "Where'd yuh get that idea?"

Sleepy sat down and began manufacturing a cigarette.

"Distrust of Bob Marsh," he replied. "Bob sets there at his desk, his big, brown eyes as full of honesty as a coyote pup is full of fleas, and explains that all on earth he wants us to do is come down here, get the best possible price on three, four cattle spreads, and let him know."

"Well?" suggested Hashknife curiously.

"That's all we've got to do," sighed Sleepy. "No rustlers, no horse-thieves—just a couple real estate men on horseback."

"Sounds all right to me," said Hashknife. "We get paid so much for the job, and if the deals go through we get more money. It's an honest job, Sleepy. Bob Marsh, as secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, can't afford to be mixed up in a crooked deal."

"Yeah, I know but—well, a man was murdered tonight."

"Men," remarked Hashknife quietly, "are murdered every day."

"Yeah, I know, but—you heard that man at the livery-stable, sayin' that everybody in the Dancin' Devil country are broke. The bank went busted—"

"Are you lookin' for boogers, Sleepy?"

"No, I'm tryin' to figure out why Bob Marsh got us down here. If he can't get us into trouble one way, he'll—well, all right."

"I've just thought of somethin' else," said Hashknife soberly. Sleepy looked sharply at him and said, "Yeah? What?"

"It ain't long until Christmas, pardner."

"I heard that mentioned tonight, High Pockets. Christmas! Heat and dust. Yuh know, I'd like to spend a Christmas in the snow agin, Hashknife. It ain't Christmas down here, except on the calendar. We had real Christmases in Idaho."

"We had 'em in Montana, too," said Hashknife. "My old man, bein' a range preacher, was strong for things like that. I 'member the church trees decorated with popcorn in strings, popcorn balls, and little, red sacks of mosquito-nettin', full of hard candy, with a tired-lookin' orange in the bottom. They'd read telegrams from Santa Claus, showin' that he was comin'—and then he'd come, all in a bear-skin coat, sleigh-bells, whiskers—"

"Bringin' a pair of skates for little Hashknife," suggested Sleepy.

"They called me Henry," smiled Hashknife, "but I never got any skates. A range preacher didn't make money enough—and we had a whopper of a family. We was poor folks, Sleepy."

"Poor folks in Tomahawk Flats, too, they say. Be a bad Christmas down there—and we're goin' down to try and buy 'em out as cheap as possible."

Hashknife nodded slowly. "That's life, Sleepy."

"It's a tough life for busted folks. Yuh know," Sleepy began rolling a cigarette, "I'll bet yuh a dollar agin a doughnut that we don't buy any spreads."

"Anythin' to base that bet on?"

"Bob Marsh. Listen, tall-feller; Bob Marsh used that as an excuse, or my original name ain't Stevens. He wanted us to come here and let Nature take her course. Yuh can't fool me, feller; I'm wise to Bob Marsh. No, I don't say that Bob's crooked, but he's allus been a connivin' critter."

"He told the idea as straight as a string, Sleepy."

"And here we are," added Sleepy. "We get off the train—and what happens? A man is blasted down with a load of buckshot, that's what happened. He poked cows for one of them poverty-stricken outfits at Tomahawk Flats."

Hashknife grinned. "A coincidence, Sleepy. Prob'ly a grudge between two men —nothin' to do with us."

"No? Nothin' t' do with us, sez he. Huh! And yore long nose has been wigglin' and sniffin', like the nose of a bloodhound, ever since that poor devil done a hooligan off the end of that caboose. Nothin' to do with us, eh? Let's go to bed, before yuh get me all riled up."

Hashknife laughed. It was like Sleepy to complain of things that might happen. They had been together a long time, these two drifting cowboys, always trying to find out what was going on over the next hill, only working long enough to suffice for their few wants, and then going on, always looking, helping some under-dog, asking nothing for themselves.

HASHKNIFE, with his ability to solve range mysteries, could have sold his services to the law, and made money. But neither law nor money meant anything to them. They had seen the law miscarry too often. They loved justice—which is not necessarily law. At rare times they worked for the Cattlemen's Association, asking only that they be given a free hand and not be hampered by rules. But neither of them enjoyed nor appreciated the work. Bob Marsh would have almost given his right hand to have them work for his organization. In fact, he used every sort of ruse to get them on certain jobs, knowing that Hashknife, confronted by a problem, would never give up, until it was solved. That was why Sleepy mistrusted Bob Marsh's casual suggestion that they make some money for themselves by asking prices on some cattle ranches.

They found the depot-agent in the little restaurant next morning, eating breakfast with Nick McGarvin, the sheriff, and his deputy, Frenchy Arnett. The agent recognized them, and told the sheriff that these were the two men who had just arrived on the freight train, and were present when Oren Blakely was shot. Hashknife introduced himself and Sleepy, and sat down at their table. He was unable to tell them any more than they already knew about the shooting.

Nick McGarvin was a big, two-fisted sort of person, and Hashknife mentally listed him as a much better man with his fists or gun than with his brains. Frenchy Arnett was small, dark, hatchet-faced, with a sour disposition and need of sleep. The agent went back to the depot, and the sheriff remarked:

"You two came in on the freight, packin' saddles, bought two broncs from the feed-corral, and said you was headin' for Tomahawk Flats tomorrow morning—that bein' today."

"The corral man told yuh," said Hashknife. "Did he also tell yuh what else we said?"

"No, he didn't. What else did yuh say?"

"I don't remember," replied Hashknife. "It was prob'ly just as important as what he told yuh."

The sheriff nodded, but Frenchy grinned and looked sideways at the sheriff. Frenchy said, "It's allus best to write it out. Things like that require study."

"What are you talkin' about?" asked the sheriff.

"Nothin', Nick."

"Tells us some more about us," suggested Sleepy soberly. "It's shore interestin'."

"We don't know any more," replied the sheriff. "It's my duty to know things."

"Yuh mean—findin' out about everybody's deep, dark past?" asked Sleepy.

"Askin'," corrected Frenchy. "Nick's good at it."

"Any idea who shot the man, Sheriff?" asked Hashknife.

"No. He's worked for the Circle H for over a year, and I ain't never knowed him to have trouble with anybody. 'Course, I'll have to check up with Sam Hack—he owns the Circle H. Sam might know who Oren was feudin' with—I dunno."

They finished breakfast, and Hashknife and Sleepy decided to ride to Tomahawk Flats with the two officers, who had, so far, failed to find out why Hashknife and Sleepy were going there. As they were saddling at the livery-stable, a rider, on a very tired horse, swung off the street and into the stable.

The sheriff said, "Hello, Jim."

Jim Bailey swung off his saddle and came over close to the sheriff. He said, "Nick, I got here as quick as I could. Somebody shot and killed Chiquita Morales last night!"

The big sheriff stared at Jim Bailey,

while Frenchy Arnett said, "Aw, Gawd, they didn't do that, Jim!"

Bailey nodded grimly. "She musta been in town, Frenchy—in a buggy. They tied the horse about a mile out of town and shot her."

Hashknife did not ask any questions as the sheriff said wearily, "We're headin' home right now, Jim. Doc Miles left about three o'clock with the body of Oren Blakely."

"It's shore gettin' to be a awful tough country," sighed Jim Bailey. "She was settin' there in the buggy—"

"Shut up!" snapped Frenchy sharply. He dropped his reins and walked over to the big, sliding doors, where he stood, staring out at the street. Jim Bailey shook his head.

"Chiquita was Frenchy's sweetheart," whispered the sheriff.

"That's what *he* thought—mebbe," said Bailey.

Bailey and Frenchy rode ahead, leaving the sheriff to ride with Hashknife and Sleepy.

"We heard that the bank went busted in Tomahawk Flats," remarked Hashknife.

"Robbed," corrected the sheriff. "Three men."

"Cleaned it out, eh?"

"Nothin' left—and it busted a lot of folks. Yuh see, Thomas Colton owned the bank—the Cattleman's Independent Bank. Old Ed Weed was the cashier. It was a good bank, too, with plenty cash. Tom Colton is a fine feller—everybody liked him. He played square with everybody—never hounded 'em on mortgages and all that.

"Well, a short time ago, three men got into Ed Weed's house, made him give 'em the combination of the safe, took his keys, tied Old Ed up so tight that he ain't rid of the kinks yet, and took their sweet time in bustin' the bank. They emptied the vault. As far as we can find out, there wasn't a thin dime left. It broke a lot of folks, I'll tell yuh that. I lost seven hundred dollars myself."

"Where," asked Hashknife, "does this Chiquita Morales figure in the deal, Sheriff?"

"She don't. Her father, Pete Morales, owns a little rancho. Chiquita is about eighteen, I reckon, and as pretty as a bug's ear. I'm past forty and I'm married, but every time she looked at me and grinned—I lost at least fifteen years of age. They're poor, them Morales are. Poor old Pete, this'll hit him hard."

"No idea who busted the bank, eh?" queried Sleepy.

The sheriff sat disgustedly. "We've got a prisoner," he said.

"Oh, yuh caught one of 'em, eh?" remarked Hashknife.

"Quien sabe? Yuh see, it's thisaway. Andy Davidson—we call him Uncle Andy, and his wife, Aunt Judy—the finest folks yuh ever knowed—have a son, Johnny. Johnny's fine. Hell, yuh can't have a pa and ma like them, and not be fine. Johnny's engaged to marry Nell Frawley on Christmas Eve. Well, Johnny's in jail."

"It don't seem to work out," said Hashknife.

"THAT'S right—but there he is. Yuh see, Johnny wears a ring. That is, he did. Navajo, I reckon. Big ring, silver and with a turquoise cross. Anybody'd know that ring. Tom Weed says that one of the men who robbed the bank wore that ring. Johnny didn't have it on his finger when we arrested him, and he can't tell us where it is. He just sets there in his cell, staring at the bars. It's a tough situation, Hartley."

"Well, can't he prove where he was that night?" asked Sleepy.

"If he can—he won't. Yuh can't get a word out of him."

"What does his girl think of the deal?" asked Sleepy.

"Nell Frawley. Lord, I dunno what she thinks. Nell is one of the finest yuh ever seen, and yuh can't beat her folks. They got hit awful hard in that bank bust, but I don't reckon they got hit as hard as Uncle Andy Davidson. He's flat—but he ain't kickin'. If Johnny was out of jail—well, I don't think Uncle Andy is givin' a thought to losin' the money."

"I can imagine," said Hashknife thoughtfully. "A fine Christmas for folks like that."

"That's right, Hartley—I'd plumb forgot about Christmas. Peace on earth—don't fit so good in Dancin' Devil Valley this season."

After a full minute of silent riding the sheriff commented, "I plumb forgot to

ask you fellers how come yo're headin' for Dancin' Devil Valley?"

Hashknife studied the bobbing ears of his horse for several moments, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Then he looked at the sheriff and said, "Sheriff you know what a wild goose is, don't yuh?"

"Of course, I do."

"We're chasin' one," said Hashknife.

The sheriff scratched his stubbled chin, looked sideways at Hashknife, but rode on, thinking it over. These two rather puzzled the law officer. They looked like a pair of drifting cowpokes, but why would a drifting cowpoke be looking for wild geese in the Dancing Devil country, he wondered. Funny thing, too—when that Hartley person looked at you and said something—you believed him. Even such a fantastic thing as chasing a wild goose.

It was afternoon, when they arrived in Tomahawk Flats, and the sheriff and coroner left immediately to get the body of the murdered Mexican girl. Men had guarded it since the discovery. Hashknife and Sleepy registered at the hotel, where folks talked about the crime wave.

The murder of Oren Blakely was secondary in importance. A man might get killed at any time, but for somebody to deliberately murder a girl—that needed attention.

"I seen Pete Morales and his old woman a while ago," one man said. "Gawd, you'd think the roof fell on both of 'em."

"It shore did," nodded a grizzled cowman. "I lost one—once—but she wasn't shot to death. That's worse—if it can be."

"Yeah, I knew. Mrs. Morales just sat there, countin' her beads, movin' her lips, never looked up at all. She wasn't cryin'—jist countin' 'em, I reckon."

"I kinda figured that her and Frenchy would get hitched," said another of the men. "They used to go down into Mexico to dances, and all that. Frenchy can talk Mexican pretty good."

Hashknife and Sleepy went up to their room to leave their war-bags. Sleepy flung his bag into a corner and stood there, his hands on his hips, looking at Hashknife, who sat down to roll a cigarette.

"Go ahead, pardner—say it," he remarked.

"Yeah! Just a couple real-estate men on horseback!" snorted Sleepy.

"Bob Marsh didn't know things like this would happen, Sleepy; he's no fortune teller. It just happened, that's all."

"Yea-a-ah? All right—be stubborn. We're here, ain't we? Pitch-forked into it by Bob Marsh. He knowed the bank was busted. Mebbe he knew Johnny Davidson was in jail. We came straight from his dog-gone office. Real-estate, yore eye!"

Hashknife lighted his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"It's a terrible thing—murderin' a girl, Sleepy."

"That's right—terrible! Terrible thing to murder a man, too."

"Even if Bob Marsh knew—"

"Losin' faith in him, eh? That's fine. Now we can start even."

"And there's a job to be done, Sleepy," after a long pause, "we've got a good alibi for bein' down here—real-estate men on horseback."

They ate supper in a little Mexican restaurant, where they found Frenchy Arnett, more than half-drunk, imbibing tequila with his meal. He didn't speak to them—merely looked at them through blood-shot eyes, and went on drinking. Frenchy was gone, when they paid for their meal.

"Frenchy fill pretty bad—I theenk so," said the Mexican proprietor.

"Tequila won't help him much," remarked Sleepy.

"Notheeng help heem much, *amigo*. Too bad."

THE murder of Chiquita Morales had sobered Tomahawk Flats. Even in the big Pasatiempo Saloon men talked in subdued tones, placed chips carefully into the jack-pots. The roulette-layout was not even uncovered. A man said, "I'd shore like to pull the rope on that dirty murderer."

Another man laughed shortly and said, "Fine chance. The best our sheriff can do is put Johnny Davidson in jail. Wouldn't have got him, if the blamed fool hadn't worn that ring."

"One cinch," said a gambler, "they can't put that onto Johnny; he was locked up tight. But I can't figure out why anybody'd shoot the girl. As far as that goes, why was Oren Blakely shot?"

"Oren was a good *hombre*," remarked another. "I talked with Sam Hack a while

ago, and he said that all he knew was that Oren left the ranch, headin' for here. Why he went to Northgate, nobody seems to know."

"Somebody did," said the gambler, "and that somebody had a shotgun and a load of buckshot. Well, I dunno—it beats me."

"Beats the sheriff, too," said another. "You watch—he'll never get either of the killers."

Hashknife and Sleepy slept late next morning, ate breakfast in the hotel dining-room, and when they came back to the lobby they saw an elderly couple, talking with the hotel-keeper. The man was small, thin, bow-legged, smooth-shaved, almost bird-like in his movements. The woman was gray-haired, tall, slender, sad-looking. The hotel-keeper saw Hashknife and Sleepy come from the dining-room doorway, and motioned to the man, who got up very quickly from his chair and came over to Hashknife.

"Your name is Hartley?" he asked quietly.

"That's right," smiled Hashknife.

"I'm Andy Davidson—AD spread. Mind talkin' to me for a few minutes?"

"I'd like to, Mr. Davidson."

"Everybody calls me Uncle Andy."

"My friends call me Hashknife, Uncle Andy."

"Yeah, that's what—that's the name in the letter I got a few minutes ago. I'll show it to yuh."

Hashknife read the short letter from Bob Marsh, which said:

> I am in receipt of your telegram a few minutes ago, and in reply I can say that two men, Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens are either now in your town, or soon will be. I have perfect confidence in them and their ability. Please keep this confidential. For that reason I am writing you, rather than to use a telegram.

There was a postscript, which said, "Give my regards to Sleepy."

Hashknife smiled slowly, folded the letter and gave it back to Uncle Andy, who was looking closely at him. Hashknife motioned to Sleepy, who came over.

"Uncle Andy," said Hashknife, "I want you to meet Sleepy Stevens. Sleepy, this is Uncle Andy Davidson. He just got a letter from Bob Marsh."

"Bob's quite a hand to write letters," remarked Sleepy. "Did he send me his regards?"

"By doggies!" exclaimed Uncle Andy. "He did just that!"

"He always does," said Sleepy. "Anyway, I'm glad to meet yuh, Uncle Andy."

They shook hands, and Uncle Andy introduced them to Aunt Judy Davidson, who also shook hands with them soberly.

"We're in a peck of trouble, boys," said Uncle Andy.

"We heard about it," said Hashknife quietly. "Trouble seems plentiful around here. Yuh see, we just got off the train at Northgate when Oren Blakely was shot."

"Oren was a nice boy," offered Aunt Judy. "I'm sorry about him. Isn't it terrible about Chiquita Morales? I liked her."

"Is there anybody you dislike?" asked Hashknife smiling. Aunt Judy thought carefully, finally shaking her head. "I just can't remember any," she said seriously.

They sat down and Uncle Andy said, "How much of the story have you heard, Hashknife?"

"The sheriff told us most of it, ridin' down here."

"Nick has been awful nice to us," said Aunt Judy. "It isn't his fault—he had to do his duty."

"She excuses everybody," said Uncle Andy.

"You, too?" queried Sleepy.

"Not always, Sleepy. I'm about the only person she ever blames."

"Tell me about this ring—the evidence against yore son," said Hashknife.

"Well," replied Uncle Andy, "Johnny bought it from a feller in Northgate. It's a big, silver contraption, and the settin' is a turquoise, cut in the shape of a cross. Anybody'd remember it, if they seen it once. Awful gaudy, I thought."

"Beautiful," added Aunt Judy. "It was a little small for Johnny, and he had to wear it on his little finger. Very heavy."

"Ed Weed recognized it," said Uncle Andy sadly. "He'd seen it lots of times. But Johnny, darn his soul, won't tell what he done with it. Just sets there and shakes his head. Yuh see," Uncle Andy cleared his throat harshly, "yuh see, Johnny and Nell

Frawley was due to get married Christmas Eve."

"Loveliest girl I ever knew," said Aunt Judy wearily.

"I'm wonderin' if Johnny would talk with me," said Hashknife.

Uncle Andy shook his head. "I don't believe he would. Won't talk to anybody, not even a lawyer. Stubborn's a bull calf."

"He might," said Aunt Judy hopefully, but added, "He ort to. Nobody can help him, if he won't talk."

"Let's try it," suggested Hashknife. "He can't no more than refuse."

"All right," replied Uncle Andy. "We'll try, but don't say I didn't warn yuh, Hashknife."

THEY found Nick McGarvin in the office. He didn't think that Johnny would talk, especially to strangers, but was willing for them to try. Johnny Davidson was a good-looking young cowboy, but he had stubborn eyes and a stubborn chin. Uncle Andy introduced Hashknife and Sleepy to him, but he didn't seem interested.

"These here men want to help yuh, Johnny," explained Uncle Andy. "But before they can help yuh, they've got to hear yore story."

"I have no story," declared Johnny stonily. "Nothin' to tell."

Hashknife moved in close to the bars, and Johnny looked at him, rather defiantly, at first. Their eyes met for several moments, and Johnny turned away, looking at his mother.

"Johnny, you ought to talk to him," she said quietly.

Johnny looked at Hashknife again, and a weak smile twisted his lips for a moment. Then he said, "All right, what do I talk about?"

"That ring, Johnny," replied Hashknife. "We've got to know what yuh done with it."

Johnny shook his head. "It won't do a bit of good," he said. "It can't do any good now—it's too damned late, Hartley."

"Why is it too late?" asked Hashknife.

"Because Chiquita Morales is dead. Oren Blakely is dead, too."

Uncle Andy said, "What did Chiquita—"

"Wait!" interrupted Hashknife. "Johnny can tell us—in his own way. Go ahead, Johnny."

Johnny gnawed at his lower lip for several moments, his eyes bleak. Hashknife noticed that his hands were clenched behind him. Finally he said:

"I traded that ring to Chiquita Morales for a pinto horse. She wanted the ring—I wanted that *pintado*. I—I was goin' to tell Nell about it. I dunno—mebbe Nell was a little jealous of Chiquita. She didn't mean anythin' to me, Chiquita didn't. There wasn't any bill-of-sale—nothin' to prove I traded. I was goin' to get the pinto—and that's all there was to it.

"She wanted the ring to wear to a dance—so I let her have it. I was down at Agua Verde that night, but I left there about seven o'clock. On the way back, at a little rancho, there was a lot of music, so I stopped to see what was goin' on. It was a dance—a pretty wild dance, too. Chiquita was there with Oren Blakely. Everybody was drunk, except Chiquita, and there had been several fist-fights. Oren was drunk, too. Chiquita wanted to go home—to get away from the place. Well, at least, I'm a gentleman—I hope. We got Oren on a horse, and all three of us came back across the line. Oren wasn't too drunk then; so we put him on the road to the Circle H, and I took Chiquita home."

"And you was afraid that Nell would find it out?" asked Uncle Andy.

"Yeah, I was," admitted Johnny. "Maybe I had no business doin' it—takin' her home, and all that—but I did."

"Was she wearin' the ring at the dance?" asked Hashknife.

"No, she wasn't," replied Johnny. "I asked her where it was, and she told me she left it at home, because it was too big, and she was afraid she'd lose it."

"I'll explain it to Nell," offered Aunt Judy.

"Thanks, Ma—but I'd rather tell her. I didn't take Chiquita to the dance—didn't even know she was there—and when she explained that she was scared to stay there—what could I do?"

"Couldn't anybody at that rancho testify that you were there, instead of robbin' a bank?" asked Uncle Andy.

"I doubt it, 'cause I didn't mix in the dance. And, anyway," said Johnny, "no-

body knows what time of night the bank was robbed. Ed Weed didn't know. They woke him up, but he never seen a clock."

"I heard that Chiquita was to marry Frenchy Arnett," said Hashknife.

"Quien sabe?" Johnny smiled sourly. "Chiquita liked to have fun. She asked me to not tell Frenchy. I wouldn't, anyway. It wasn't my business."

"Johnny," said Hashknife, "do you know of anybody who hated Oren Barkley enough to shoot him? Maybe somebody who knew he took Chiquita to a dance."

Johnny shook his head. "No, I don't, Hartley. Frenchy was supposed to be keepin' steady company with Chiquita. Frenchy was either in Northgate, or on his way up there, when she was killed. Oren wasn't quarrelsome. In fact, that night was the first time I had ever seen him drunk. Oh, he took a drink now and then, I suppose, but not enough to affect him."

"Well, much obliged, Johnny," said Hashknife, shaking hands through the bars.

"Yo're welcome, Hartley. Glad to have met yuh—and you, too, Stevens."

He kissed his mother between the bars, and they went out. Aunt Judy took hold of Hashknife's shoulders and turned him around on the sidewalk, looking straight into his eyes.

"I just wanted to find out why Johnny talked to you," she said as he smiled slowly at her.

"Don't be silly, Ma," grinned Uncle Andy.

"I'm not silly," she said quietly, and turned away. Hashknife patted her on the shoulder.

"I dunno how it was done—but it was," Uncle Andy said. "Hashknife, we want you and Sleepy to make the ranch yore home. We've got room out there, and we'd sure admire havin' yuh stay there."

"Later—maybe," said Hashknife. "Thank yuh both a lot."

"Make it when yuh can; we'll be lookin' for yuh."

NICK McGARVIN, the sheriff, was a little amazed over the willingness of Johnny Davidson to talk to a stranger. And he was also a bit curious as to just why Andy Davidson had brought these two strangers to the jail for the conference. He asked Johnny, who thought it over for several moments.

"I don't know, Nick," he said. "Mother and Dad brought 'em in here, and Hartley, the tall one asked me questions."

"Which you answered," said the sheriff dryly.

"That's right, I did—but don't ask me why, Nick. It is kinda funny. Somethin' about him—I dunno what."

Pete Morales and his wife came to town, and the sheriff asked Pete if he knew anything about Chiquita trading a pinto horse to Johnny Davidson for a turquoise ring.

Pete shook his head sadly. *"Mi amigo,"* he said wearily, "I know notheeng, excep's Chiquita ees died. I see no reeng."

"Did you know that Chiquita went to the dance in Mexico with Oren Blakely?"

Again the little Mexican shook his head. "No," he said huskily. "I tell her, 'Kip to hell from those dance at Miguel's rancho. Bad pippil down there.' But I theenk she go anyway."

Nick McGarvin went back to his office. Frenchy hadn't showed up yet. The death of Chiquita Morales was a terrible blow to the little deputy—and he was drinking too much.

Sam Hack and his only remaining cowboy, Gus Staley, came over to the sheriff's office. Hack was a tall, gaunt man, with deep-set eyes, long arms and huge, bony hands. Hack was really a newcomer to the Dancing Devil range, having bought the NK spread from the bank, which had it on a foreclosure, and registered his own brand. Oren Blakely had been one of his two men. Gus Staley was rather a nondescript cowpoke, who liked liquor and cards.

Hack wanted action. He said, "Nick, you've got to do somethin' about the murder of Oren. Yuh can't let things like that go."

"Suggest somethin'," replied the harassed sheriff. "It's easy to talk about, Sam. Nobody knows why Oren headed for Northgate, nobody knows who wanted to shoot him. Everyone seemed to like him. If you know anythin' else, let me know."

"Well," replied Hack soberly, "I wish I could, Nick. Has Johnny Davidson talked yet?"

"Johnny talked this mornin', Sam. He wouldn't talk to me, and he wouldn't talk

to his ma and pa—but he talked to a stranger."

"Meanin' what?" asked Hack flatly.

The sheriff shook his head. "I dunno, Sam—I can't figure it."

And then the sheriff told them what Johnny told Hashknife.

Sam Hack and Gus Staley listened closely while the sheriff related Johnny's story, and the sheriff finished with:

"I asked Johnny why he told all this to Hartley, when he wouldn't talk with anybody else, and he said he didn't know."

"Kinda funny," remarked Hack. He turned to Staley, "Gus, did you know that Oren took Chiquita to that dance?"

Staley shook his head. "Oren didn't talk much," he replied. "He was drunk when he got back to the ranch that night, but he didn't say where he'd been, I figured he got drunk here."

"Gus," said the sheriff, "you've been with Oren a long time. If I remember right, you came here with him. Do you know anybody who hated him enough to shoot him?"

"Hell, no!" snorted Gus Staley.

"Well, there yuh are," said the sheriff, shrugging helplessly. "Gus has been bunkin' the man all this time, and even *he* don't know who'd shoot him."

"Who is Hartley and Stevens?" asked Hack.

The sheriff smiled. "I rode all the way down here from Northgate with them two," he said, "and all I know is that they've each got two legs and two arms. Yuh might ask Andy Davidson—he seemed to know 'em."

"Just a couple driftin' cowpokes, eh?"

"You name 'em," replied the sheriff. "They came in on the freight-train, got off at Northgate, just before Oren climbed on and got shot. They had their saddles along with 'em, and I know they bought two horses at the feed corral."

"Well," yawned Hack, "we've got to be driftin', Nick. When is the inquest?"

"Tomorrow mornin', Doc Talbert told me. You'll be here?"

"Yeah. After all, Oren was one of my boys."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy sprawled on chairs under the porch of the hotel. Hashknife, as relaxed as a cat, smoked thoughtfully, paying little attention to activity on the street.

"How much of Johnny Davidson's story do yuh reckon a jury would believe?" inquired Sleepy.

"Very little, Sleepy."

"Do you believe him?"

"Certainly, I believe him. With all the lies possible, he told a story that can't possibly help him. The girl is dead—and he didn't have to tell the truth about the ring. The kid's honest."

"Yo're like Aunt Judy—everybody is all right."

Sam Hack and Gus Staley came past the porch and went on up the street. Both of them looked curiously at Hashknife and Sleepy. Frank Olds, the hotel-keeper, standing in the doorway of the hotel, waved a greeting to them, and he said to the two cowboys:

"That's the feller Oren Blakely worked for—Sam Hack. He's the tall one; the other is Gus Staley."

"Is Hack an old-timer down here?" asked Hashknife.

"No, he came here a little over a year ago and bought out the NK. Bought it from the bank, I reckon—they held a big mortgage, and Kinney, the owner, couldn't make the grade."

"You knew Blakely?" asked Sleepy.

"Yeah. Nice boy, too. I know most everybody. Growed up here."

"I hear," remarked Hashknife lazily, "that the bank bust hurt folks pretty hard around here."

"Busted some of 'em. Yuh take Andy Davidson and Ed Frawley, they got hit awful hard. Had most all their money in the bank, I've been told. Davidson just sold a train-load of cows, and they tell me he lost every cent in the bank. Frawley got hit about as hard. They ain't kickin'—'cause they ain't that kind."

"What do yuh think of Johnny Davidson's chances?" asked Sleepy.

"Well, I'll tell yuh; with that ring as evidence, and with a Dancin' Devil jury, he's got about as much chance as a celluloid cat has in hell. The jury will believe Ed Weed. I hate to see it happen to the Davidson family, but Johnny is stuck."

"What happened to the banker?" asked Sleepy.

"Oh, he's still livin' here. Tom Colton's his name. Got sort of a no-good son, named Harry. He tried to make a banker out of him, but it didn't work. Make a better banker for a faro game, I reckon. Drinks like a fish, Harry does."

After all this information Frank Olds went back to his hotel work, and Hashknife and Sleepy walked over to the livery-stable. The stable-man was also a loquacious soul. He was standing in the rear doorway of the stable, staring out at a rather dilapidated top-buggy. He said, complainingly, "I wish they'd take that damn thing away from here."

"Why?" asked Sleepy.

"That's the buggy Chiquita Morales was killed in. They brung it here. Said that it was mebbe evidence. Huh! Blood all over it, too. I sleep in the tack-room—and I dream about that blasted, old buggy. Chiquita was awful pretty. I dunno, I reckon it'll stay there, until the sheriff takes it away."

Hashknife walked out and looked it over. Not much of a buggy, the worn cushion spattered with gore, dried black now, a broken buggy-whip in the old socket, ready to fall off the dash. Sleepy and the stable-man had turned to talk with someone, when Hashknife pulled the seat-cushion loose from the back. Something rattled loosely, and Hashknife reached in and picked it up. One swift glance and he put the object in his pocket, shoved the cushion into place and walked back to the doorway.

A young man was talking with the stable-man, paying him some money. He was wearing "store-clothes," except for his high-heel boots, and seemed just a trifle inebriated. A good-looking young man, too, except for the deep lines of dissipation in his face. After he went out, the stable-man said:

"That's Harry Colton, the busted banker's son. He keeps his horse here in the stable, and pays his bills regular. I hate to see a young man drinkin' thataway. His old man tried to keep him straight, but I don't reckon it was any use. Too much money and nothin' else to do."

"Mebbe," suggested Sleepy, "he won't have too much money now."

"Did yuh hear what he said?" asked the stable-man.

Sleepy shook his head.

"He said he'd prob-ly have to sell his horse. Can't afford to pay feed bills much longer."

"He might cut down on his whiskey bills," suggested Hashknife.

"You don't know Harry," grinned the stable-man.

THEY walked back to the hotel and went up to their room, where Hashknife took the object from his pocket and placed it on the table. It was a huge, Mexican silver ring, with a turquoise cross. Sleepy stared at it, picked it up gingerly and examined it. He put it back on the table and sat down by the window.

"It was under that seat cushion," said Hashknife.

"Maybe," suggested Sleepy, "Chiquita thought she was bein' held up, and hid it under the cushion."

"It kinda figures out like this," said Hashknife. "Chiquita made the trade with Johnny. She wasn't in love with Johnny, but it kinda seems that she—well, she wasn't a one-man woman. Before the robbery, she let somebody have that ring. Maybe she got it back. Maybe she was scared to keep it. Maybe she hid it under the cushion. Maybe—"

"After all that," interrupted Sleepy, "what do yuh think actually happened?"

"I don't know," grinned Hashknife, and pocketed the ring.

"This can't help Johnny none," said Sleepy.

"I don't reckon it can help anybody," smiled Hashknife, "but it's a mighty pretty ring."

They went back to the hotel lobby, where they were accosted by an elderly, well-dressed man. He said, "You are Mr. Hartley?"

"That's my name," nodded Hashknife.

"I am Thomas Colton, Mr. Hartley. Shall we sit down?"

Sleepy sprawled on a chair near a window, while Hashknife and Thomas Colton, former banker, sat down together.

The banker said, "I have a confidential letter from a land syndicate in Phoenix, saying that they are interested in buying cattle ranches in the Dancing Devil range, as an investment, and asking about prices.

Today I received this telegram, which I will show you."

The telegram was sent to the banker, and signed James Morison. It read:

ADVISE YOU THAT A MR. HARTLEY IS AUTHORIZED TO CONTACT RANCH OWNERS AND CONSULT THEM ON PRICES.

Hashknife read the telegram and handed it back to Colton, who said quietly, "The banks holds paper against nearly every ranch down here—rather big paper, I might say, and—"

"I understand that," interrupted Hashknife, "but mortgages have nothin' to do with my job. I merely ask prices."

"And I might say," continued the banker, "that few, if any, can meet their mortgages. Confidentially, Mr. Hartley, the ranches of this valley are in bad shape. I mean, financially, of course."

"Nothin' wrong with the ranches?" queried Hashknife. "This looks like a good range."

"Oh, it is, indeed! That is one reason that the bank was generous. Have you made any inquiries, Mr. Hartley?"

"I didn't want to rush 'em," said Hashknife. "Why?"

"Well, I—no reason at all, except that I—well, I might be able to get a better price than you could—knowing conditions."

Hashknife smiled as he looked at Colton. "Maybe yuh don't think I'm the right man to buy cattle ranches," he suggested.

"No, no, I didn't mean that! After all, the Cattlemen's Association wouldn't recommend a—well, a man who wasn't capable."

"Thank yuh," said Hashknife dryly. "You go ahead, Mr. Colton. Maybe you can do better than I could. Anyway, it's worth tryin'."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Hartley. I'll see what I can do, and then we can compare notes. I'll see you again—and thank you. It might be well to not mention our little talk to anyone."

"I'll keep still," agreed Hashknife.

Sleepy was curious, and came over as soon as Colton left. Hashknife told him the conversation, and Sleepy said, "What's he tryin' to do—beat us out of our jobs?"

"Even a banker can make a mistake, pardner," smiled Hashknife.

"He's shore mistaken if he thinks he can take our jobs over," declared Sleepy. "I like to draw money for loafin'."

A DOUBLE inquest was held next forenoon in Tomahawk Flats, and it seemed as though everybody in Dancing Devil Valley came to listen. Because they had been present at the shooting of Oren Blakely, both Hashknife and Sleepy were called to the stand to testify. Both Aunt Judy and Uncle Andy were there, and with them sat Ed Frawley and his daughter, Nell. Huddled together were Pete Morales and his wife, listening closely, but not understanding much of what was said. Frenchy Arnett was there, still half-drunk. Sam Hack and his one man, Gus Staley, were there, and Uncle Andy introduced Hashknife and Sleepy to Buck Nolan, who owned the Bar N.

There was no one to testify in the murder of Chiquita Morales. They put Pete Morales on the stand, but Pete either didn't understand, or had nothing to tell them. The jury in both cases brought in the only possible verdict—killed by a party or parties unknown.

Hashknife and Sleepy met the Davidsons on the street after the inquest, and were introduced to Nell Frawley and her father. Nell was a pretty, brunette, tall and willowy, but very sad over the plight of Johnny Davidson. Aunt Judy said, "Ed, you and Nell are comin' out to have supper with us, and I'm askin' Hashknife and Sleepy to come out with us."

"What are we waitin' for?" asked Sleepy quickly.

"But, Aunt Judy, we didn't intend—" began Ed Frawley.

"Don't lie to me, Ed Frawley," she said. "I saw that hunger-for-sourmilk-biscuits in your eye, when I mentioned supper."

"Well, I—uh—shore," agreed Frawley, while Sleepy remarked:

"Speakin' about love—I ain't et a sourmilk biscuit since ol' Settin' Bull got up and leaned against a tree."

"As Sleepy said," remarked Uncle Andy, "what are we waitin' for, folks?"

"It isn't noon yet," said Ed Frawley.

"Don't you folks eat at noon?" asked Sleepy soberly.

"Let's go out to the ranch," said Aunt

Judy. "I've got to fill him up, before he starves on our hands."

The ranch-house and buildings at the AD were well-kept, the grounds clean. Uncle Andy admitted to Hashknife that Aunt Judy was responsible for the appearance of the place.

They met Ted Evans and Eddie Connors, the two cowpokes.

"I've allus wanted to see what you looked like, Hartley," remarked Connors.

"Wanted to see what I looked like?" queried Hashknife.

"Yeah, that's right. I heard about you up on the Wind River, and then I heard more about yuh in Colorado, and the last feller to speak about yuh was from the Thunder River country."

"I didn't know I was worth talkin' about," said Hashknife.

"Well, I'm tellin' yuh," grinned Connors. "If yo're half as good as the lies I've heard—yo're a ring-tailed wonder."

"I'm not, Connors," assured Hashknife. "Men will lie, yuh know."

"Then I shore ran into several, Hartley—and they all lied about the same things."

"What's this all about?" demanded Aunt Judy.

"Somebody tryin' to ruin my reputation, Aunt Judy."

"Ruin it!" exclaimed Connors. "Lemme tell yuh what—"

"Don't repeat it—there's ladies present," interrupted Hashknife, and went into the house with the others.

NELL volunteered to help Aunt Judy in the kitchen, and two ranch owners sat down with Hashknife and Sleepy in the main room. There was plenty of food for conversation, but no one seemed inclined to start it, until Ed Frawley, his pipe drawing well, said, "Andy, have you talked with Tom Colton?"

"Not for a couple of days, Ed."

"I talked with him this mornin'. It seems that he's representin' a land-buying syndicate, and they'd like to buy the Rafter F—if they can get it cheap enough."

"Yea-a-ah? The buzzards are already wingin' in, eh?"

"That's what I told him."

"I can see his angle," said Uncle Andy. "We owe money to the bank, which don't exist now. Him bein' the owner of the bank, wants his money out of the deal."

"And we can't pay him," said Frawley flatly. "If we get any kind of a decent offer, we'll have to sell."

Uncle Andy turned to Hashknife, "Sorry to talk about somethin' you don't know about," he said. "I'll tell yuh how I'm fixed. I owe the bank twelve thousand dollars. Not long ago I sold a lot of beef, and I put twenty-eight thousand dollars on deposit. I wanted to pay off that mortgage right now, but Colton said—Oh, I don't understand bankin', Hashknife. Somethin' about havin' to pay a lot of interest and a bonus if I took it up now; so I let it lay. Well, the twenty-eight thousand dollars is gone—and I can't pay the mortgage."

"I'm in the same boat," said Frawley. "My mortgage was due two days after the robbery. I owed Colton ten thousand, and I had—well, I had enough in there to pay it off and not mind."

"Tough deal," murmured Hashknife. "Just how was this robbery pulled off?"

"I can tell yuh what Weed said," replied Uncle Andy. "Weed is a bachelor, livin' alone. Been here years. He said he went to bed, but he don't know what time—maybe nine o'clock, and went to sleep. He don't know what time he woke up, but the lamp was lighted and three masked men was around him. They told him they wanted the key to the bank and the combination of the vault.

"One of them told him that he'd either do what they want, or they'd kill him, take the keys to the bank and bust it with dynamite. They got the keys and the combination, tied Weed up tight, and pulled out. They had all night to do the job—and they shore done a complete job."

"And he saw that turquoise ring, eh?" said Hashknife.

And Davidson nodded slowly. "He says he saw it plain."

"Weed is honest, eh?"

"Honest as a dollar," sighed Uncle Andy. "I've talked with him several times, and he's just about sick. Weed is pretty old, and he ain't got any job. Everythin' he owned was in the bank, too."

"I told him," said Frawley quietly, "that if things got too tough he could come out and live with us."

"I told him the same thing," said Uncle Andy, "and so did Buck Nolan. Buck didn't owe the bank anythin', but he lost every dollar he had in there."

"Seems like we're askin' Weed to join us in the poor-house," said Frawley dryly. "I know I can't keep goin'. I've got a couple good cowpokes out at my place, but I can't afford to keep 'em more'n a couple weeks longer."

"This looks like a mighty good range," remarked Sleepy.

"There ain't any better," declared Uncle Andy warmly.

"Maybe they'll offer yuh a *good* price."

"Why should they?" asked Frawley. "Colton didn't suggest any price. He said they'd naturally buy as cheap as possible, and he said for me to figure out my lowest price. He'll prob'ly make you the same proposition, Andy."

Uncle Andy stared thoughtfully at the carpet for several moments, before he said quietly:

"We've been here a long time, Ed. It ain't just like sellin 'a piece of property—it's home. Yuh can't tear up roots that have gone as deep as ours, my friend. We ain't young men—me and you. Ed, I just can't sell the AD."

"I feel the same, Andy," replied Frawley.

"Will Nolan have to sell, too?" asked Hashknife.

"I dunno, Hashknife," replied Uncle Andy. "It hit him hard, but he don't owe the bank anythin'."

"What about Sam Hack?"

"I don't believe he had much in the bank. Yuh see, he's only had the Circle H a little over a year. He bought out the NK from a feller named Kinney. The bank had to foreclose a mortgage on the NK, and I reckon Hack made a good deal for the spread. He's buildin' it up."

"How long," asked Hashknife, "has Colton owned the bank?"

"A little over two years," replied Frawley. "Weed worked for the bank for at least twenty years. Harry Colton was in college when his father bought the bank, and has only been here about a year. He's no good. Drinks like a fish, and gambles like a fool. He had the gall to want Nell to marry him."

"That," declared Sleepy soberly, "don't take much gall."

"You know what I mean, Stevens," laughed Frawley.

HASHKNIFE walked out into the kitchen. Aunt Judy was working at the stove, while Nell was on the back porch, talking with Eddie Connors, who went down the steps and headed for the bunkhouse. Hashknife went out on the shaded porch. Nell said, "Your ears must have burned, Mr. Hartley."

Hashknife smiled and shook his head. "I haven't felt 'em."

"We were talking about you."

"That's a pretty dry topic for conversation," he said soberly.

"Eddie didn't think so. Oh, I didn't want to be curious, but Uncle Andy talked about you—and Eddie—" She hesitated.

"That's the trouble," he said quietly. "Somethin' ordinary happens, and somebody with a big imagination spins a windy about it. The next feller enlarges it. Well, after it's been told several times, you've either got wings and one of them halos, or a forked tail and a pair of horns. But even with all the lies, the poor devil remains a tired ol' cowpoke, just gettin' along in his own dumb way, Ma'am."

"You're not so old," said Nell.

"I'm old enough to know better, Ma'am."

"I don't like to be called Ma'am. My name is Nell."

Hashknife smiled slowly. "I like that name. I'm Hashknife."

"Just a poor, old, tired cowpoke," she said slowly. "Johnny said you just looked at him, and he decided to tell the truth, but he wouldn't talk to anybody before that. How did you do it, Hashknife?"

Hashknife looked at her thoughtfully. "I just asked him, Nell."

"Do people always do what you ask?"

"Well," Hashknife grinned widely, "I don't ask—much. Did you know Chiquita Morales very well?"

"Are you practicing on me?" asked Nell quickly.

"No, I just wondered if yuh knew her pretty well."

"Not too well," replied Nell. "Chiquita was pretty, tiny, full of life. She liked to have a good time, wear pretty clothes. But

the Morales are poor people. I don't believe they had much control over her. I liked her. She was very generous, sympathetic, but very emotional."

"Do you think she would have married Frenchy Arnett, Nell?"

"No, I don't, Hashknife. Frenchy was too slow for her. She went to that Mexican dance with Oren Blakely, and Frenchy didn't know it. If Chiquita wanted to go some place she'd ask most any man to take her—she didn't have any favorites, it seemed."

"The Morales' are pretty poor, eh?" remarked Hashknife.

"Yes, they are. I never could understand where Chiquita got money to buy fancy clothes, but she wore plenty."

"Maybe some cowpoke bought 'em," suggested Hashknife.

"At forty dollars a month?"

"No, that don't go far," admitted Hashknife. "Did you ever know her to go to dances with Harry Colton?"

"With the banker's son? You amaze me, Hashknife."

Hashknife smiled slowly. "I even amaze myself, at times, Nell."

"No, I never have seen them together," she said. "No reason why not. After all, Harry Colton isn't too good, in spite of his money. Now that his father is broke, I don't know what he will do."

Aunt Judy came out on the porch to cool off.

"Who are you folks plottin' against?" she asked.

"The forces of evil, Aunt Judy," replied Nell.

"Well, it must have been pleasant plotting—the way you've been smiling. Isn't she a sweet girl, Hashknife?"

"Aunt Judy!" protested Nell.

"I've been thinkin' that all along," grinned Hashknife.

"How come you never got married?" asked Aunt Judy.

"Well," replied Hashknife thoughtfully, "I don't reckon I've ever had time. My old Dad was a range-ridin' sky-pilot up on the Milk River in Montana. He had a houseful of kids, and mighty little money to take care of 'em. When I was still a sprout, I got a horse and a riding rig. I had itchin' feet. Dad said, 'Son, I've been watchin' yuh a long time—lookin' at them hills. You want to see what's on the other side. When you was born the good Lord put a wanderin' brand on yuh. I've seen that brand growin'. You'll never call any place home, never be held by any ties. I've tried to teach yuh to shoot square—it's the best I can do.' "

"And you started wandering," said Aunt Judy.

"All my life, Aunt Judy—Dad's prophecy was right. Sleepy is of the same breed—we can't stay put."

"Helping people," said Nell quietly.

"Who told you that?" he asked.

"Eddie Connors. I think it is wonderful. We need help, Hashknife."

Hashknife squinted thoughtfully across the hills. After a long pause he said, "Yeah, I reckon yuh do, Nell."

"Johnny and me were going to get married Christmas Eve."

"That ain't far away, Nell, and there ain't much to work on, but we'll hope that it's all written our way in the Big Book."

"Big Book?" queried Aunt Judy quickly.

"There is a big book, yuh know, Aunt Judy," said Hashknife.

"I've never heard of it before."

"I've never seen it," smiled Hashknife. "No mortal's eyes have ever seen it—but the finger of Fate writes in that book. It shows what we do, how we live, how we die—and when."

"That's fatalism!" exclaimed Aunt Judy. "You don't believe in that, do you, Hashknife?"

"I believe," replied Hashknife, "that you'll never die until your number is up on the board, Aunt Judy. Bein' careful is a human trait, but it won't save yuh. Men have gone through hell and high water all their lives, only to trip over a chair in the dark and break their neck. What's yore argument against it, Aunt Judy?"

"Well, I—when you started, I had several—but I guess I've forgotten what they were."

"School is dismissed," grinned Hashknife.

IT WAS a wonderful supper. Aunt Judy was a fine cook, and Sleepy almost ate himself under the table. They got back to Tomahawk Flats about nine o'clock, and were standing in front of the Pasatiempo

Saloon, when a horse and buggy drove up. A man had just come out of the saloon, and the driver called to him, asking directions for finding Thomas Colton's home. Then the buggy turned and went back up the street. The man had leaned out of the buggy, his face full in the lights of the saloon. Hashknife said quietly, "Did you see that feller, Sleepy?"

"No, I didn't pay any attention. Sort of a fat man, wasn't he?"

"Sort of—yeah. I've seen that face before, but I can't quite place him. C'mon."

"Are yuh goin' to try and run him down?" asked Sleepy.

"I hadn't thought of that—but I'm curious."

Thomas Colton's home was only two blocks off the main street, but there were no lights on the street, and the night was dark. They found the horse and buggy at Colton's front gate. There were lights in the house, but the windows were shaded. Sleepy wanted to know why they ever came down there, in the first place. Didn't Mr. Colton have any right to have a visitor.

Hashknife laughed. "That visitor," he said, "is a man we both knew in Wyomin', Sleepy. His name was Slim Regan. What it is now, who knows?"

"Slim Regan?" queried Sleepy. "I 'member him. He was a gambler and a promoter, wasn't he?"

"That's the person—I'm dead sure. Maybe he didn't recognize me—my back bein' to the light, and we ain't seen him for at least five years. Maybe he's livin' straight now—who knows?"

They started back, when they heard footsteps on the wooden sidewalk, coming from the opposite direction. The walker was wearing spurs. It was too dark for them to see him, but he turned in at Colton's gate and went to the house. There were no lights, when the door was opened, but they heard it close behind him.

"Maybe the Coltons are havin' a party," suggested Sleepy.

Hashknife didn't offer any suggestions, but started down the road, heading in the direction from which the spur-wearing person came. After a short distance they cut over to the sidewalk, and went on, until they found the horse, tied to a tree almost at the outskirts of town. It was a tall roan animal, and with the aid of a match they were able to decipher the Bar N brand on the animal. Sleepy said, "That's Buck Nolan's mark, Hashknife."

They sat down in the darkness and waited possibly fifteen minutes, but no one came along.

"Even if he did come for the horse, it's too dark to recognize him. Anyway, there ain't no law," said Sleepy.

"I reckon yo're right," agreed Hashknife. "No use settin' here."

They were almost back at Colton's house, when they heard the rasp of buggy-wheels, as the vehicle was turned around. A few moments later the horse and buggy came past them, traveling fast, heading back toward where the horse was tied. The Colton house was dark.

"Well," remarked Sleepy, "what's funny about that?"

"I didn't say it was funny," replied Hashknife.

They went up to their room at the hotel and went to bed. Sleepy said, "Ain't we even goin' to try and get prices on ranches?"

"We'll let Colton see what he can do first. After all, he knows values better than we do."

THEY met Thomas Colton next morning, and he asked them if they had discussed prices with any of the ranchers.

"We're leavin' that to you, Mr. Colton," said Hashknife.

"Well, that is right, Mr. Hartley. No use of both of us working on the same idea. Are you leaving here soon?"

"I'll tell yuh," replied Hashknife soberly, "if we can buy at a good price, we might take over a spread ourselves."

This seemed to confuse Colton. He said, "Well, I—yes, of course. I had no idea you—well, why not?"

"If we got it cheap enough," said Hashknife. "We like this range. After all, a feller ought to settle down."

"Yes, I believe—we will talk about it again, Mr. Hartley."

Mr. Colton went on. Sleepy braced against a porch-post, looked inquiringly at Hashknife.

"Settlin' down, eh?" he remarked. "That's wonderful. Goin' to buy a ranch. Total assets about twenty-five dollars."

"If we could get it cheap enough—" said Hashknife.

AUNT JUDY and Uncle Andy came to town before noon, and were talking with Hashknife and Sleepy in front of the sheriff's office, when Buck Nolan came riding up to the office. He nodded to them, started for the office doorway, when the sheriff came out.

"Nick, there's a buggy wrecked in Horseshoe Canyon," said Nolan. "I saw where it went over the rip-rap, and it's down there about a hundred feet below the grade. I was comin' down from Northgate and—"

"Yuh mean—a buggy and team went off the grade, Buck?"

"It sure looks like it, Nick. Yuh can see some of the buggy, all smashed up on the rocks down there."

"I'll get Frenchy. You take us back there, Buck. Maybe Hartley and Stevens will go with us; we'll need plenty help. I wonder who went off the grade."

Hashknife looked curiously at Buck Nolan, big, raw-boned, just a bit gray. Buck was riding a sorrel, bearing his own brand. Then Hashknife and Sleepy hurried to the stable to get their horses. Sleepy said, "I'm wonderin' a little, too, pardner."

"We don't know the man—if its Regan," said Hashknife.

"I know what yuh mean," said Sleepy.

It was several miles out to Horseshoe Canyon. Frenchy went along, but showed little interest. He was sober, but his brown eyes were bloodshot from too much whiskey.

The coroner went in a spring-wagon, taking plenty ropes along. The wheel-marks on the edge of the grade were very plain, and they could see part of the smashed buggy. There was a trail into the canyon just above the wreck, and they went down on foot.

Slim Regan had been thrown clear of the buggy, but straight into a jumble of jagged rocks. The scent of whiskey still lingered on the dead man's clothes, and there was a smashed bottle in the bottom of the buggy. They took the body to open ground, where the coroner examined the pockets of his clothes, but all they found was a pocket-knife and a few dollars in silver coin. There was not a scrap of paper to identify him.

It was quite a task, getting the body back to the grade. The coroner said that there was no question of its being an accident. Hashknife made no comments. The coroner could be right, except that the wheel marks on the edge of the grade showed the buggy traveling south, instead of north. Sleepy had noticed that detail, too.

As they rode together off the grade, the latter said, "If Slim Regan wanted to pile his carcass into the canyon, why did he turn the buggy around and make the dive? It's just as fatal, goin' north as it is south."

Hashknife nodded grimly. He said, "Keep yore eyes open, pardner—there's brains workin' down here. They didn't want anybody to know that Regan was in Tomahawk Flats last night. Regan rode up in front of the Pasatiempo Saloon and asked a man where Tom Colton lived. Who was the man he asked, Sleepy?"

Sleepy scowled thoughtfully, and finally said, "Hashknife, I ain't exactly sure. Yuh see, I wasn't payin' much attention, but I kinda seem to remember that it was Gus Staley. I can't be sure—but I think it was. He works for that feller Hack."

"Yeah, that's right. Regan went to see Tom Colton, stayed there maybe half an hour, and then pulled out. Regan is a gambler."

"Was," corrected Sleepy, "until he hit bedrock. What do yuh make out of it?"

Hashknife didn't say. He thought it over and finally remarked, "Sleepy, I wish we knew who the man was who walked in the dark and wore spurs."

"And rode a Bar N roan," added Sleepy. "But what does it add up to?"

"I dunno. Doc Talbert said he'd make a complete examination of the body. That might help our case."

But Doctor Talbert's examination didn't help them any. Any evidence of foul play, except by gun-shot, would have been wiped out by the man's fall onto the rocks. Nick McGarvin asked that everybody take a look at the body, hoping that someone would identify him, but to no avail. The keeper of the livery-stable at Northgate had rented him the horse and buggy, but had no idea where the man was going. He gave the name of Jim Hendricks, paid in advance

for the rig, and said he would be gone overnight. Asked about Hendrick's having any baggage, the stable-man said he wasn't sure, but believed the man had a small valise.

Hashknife met Sam Hack and Gus Staley on the street and stopped to talk with them.

"Did you look at the dead man, Staley?" he asked.

"Yeah—sure, I seen him, Hartley. I don't—"

"Think back," said Hashknife. "Wasn't he the same man who drove up in front of the Pasatiempo that night and asked you how to find Thomas Colton's house?"

Gus Staley looked blankly at Hashknife. "I dunno what yuh mean," he replied. "I never seen the man before. You must mean somebody else. I never seen him in a buggy in my life."

"I see," murmured Hashknife. "Well, it don't matter."

"Didn't the man run off the grade *comin'* here?" asked Hack.

"Yeah, it looks thataway," replied Hashknife. "A couple hundred yards further along the grade is a place where he could turn his outfit around. Maybe he was comin' back—I dunno."

"You ain't sure he *ever* was down here, are yuh?" asked Hack.

"Him or his ghost."

"Ghost?" Staley spat viciously into the dusty street. "You don't believe in ghosts, do yuh, Hartley?"

"I know what I have seen," replied Hashknife seriously, "but I never try to impose my ideas on other people."

"That's all damn foolishment!" snorted Staley. "When yo're dead—yo're dead, and that's all there is to it."

"That's the best way to look at it," remarked Hashknife.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy did not go to the funeral of Chiquita Morales, but they heard that Frenchy Arnett paid most of the expenses. Thomas Colton had approached Uncle Andy regarding selling the AD, but Uncle Andy avoided making any definite price. He knew he would have to sell eventually, but held off. Hashknife talked with Johnny at the jail, but Johnny was little help. He stuck to his story that he'd traded the ring to Chiquita for a pinto horse, and that she didn't wear the ring to that dance in Mexico. Hashknife didn't tell Johnny that he'd found the ring in the Morale's buggy. Johnny said, "I'm stuck, Hashknife. If Chiquita had lived, she could have testified that I didn't own the ring."

"That," said Hashknife, "is why she died. Johnny, do yuh know of any man around here she liked well enough to give that ring?"

Johnny shook his head. "Chiquita, I believe, was a good girl. She liked a good time, and she didn't have to want for men to take her places. She wanted money, fine clothes and all that. Yuh see, a cowpoke's wages don't cover that, Hashknife."

"Where did she get her finery, Johnny. Pete Morales couldn't afford to buy things for her."

"Yeah, that's right—I never thought of that. Well, she never tried to get money from anybody—as far as I know."

"Johnny, did Harry Colton ever go out with her?"

Johnny leaned against the bars of his cell and thought it over. Finally he said quietly, "I'm just wonderin'."

Johnny might have said more, but Frenchy Arnett came in. He was sober, but grim-faced. Hashknife said, "Frenchy, wouldn't you like to know who shot Chiquita?"

Frenchy shut his eyes tightly for a moment and his jaw tightened. "Sure would," he said quietly, but firmly. "I know she went to a dance with Oren Blakely. That was right; Oren didn't do it. Damn right, I'd like to know, Hartley."

"Maybe you can help us find him, Frenchy. Did you ever give her money to buy clothes?"

"Give Chiquita money? No! Why do you ask that?"

"They say she wore nice clothes."

"Chiquita always look nice—silk skirt, pretty shoes."

"Pete Morales didn't have money to buy them with, Frenchy."

Frenchy thought it over. Suddenly he faced Hashknife, his eyes hot. "You mean to say somebody gave her money—Chiquita?"

"Keep cool," advised Johnny. "Hashknife wants to help."

"She was my girl," said Frenchy huskily. "If she wanted money, I'd give it to her.

Who gave her money? Oren Blakely didn't have money to give to women. Who gave her money?"

"You knew about Johnny tradin' her that ring for a pinto?"

"Sure—I heard that. That is all right—the pinto belonged to her."

"Frenchy, Chiquita loaned or sold that ring to the man who killed her. Johnny is in jail for a robbery, and the evidence is that ring he traded Chiquita. She could have told who had that ring. She didn't tell, because she didn't want that man in jail—but he didn't take a chance."

Frenchy shrugged his shoulders. "Chiquita go out with other men. Sometimes I warn not here—sometimes I have no money to spend. I am not her husband—I can't say no. Maybe she don't tell me. That is her business."

"Frenchy, did she ever go out with Harry Colton?" asked Hashknife.

Frenchy's lips shut to a thin line and he walked over to a barred window, but came back.

"I think she did," he said quietly. "I accuse her of it, but she just laughed at me. How did you know this, Hartley?"

"I didn't—I just wanted to find out what men she went out with. Chiquita is gone now, Frenchy. Nothing can change that. Our job is to find the man who did it."

"Sure, she's gone—now," breathed Frenchy and walked away, his eyes filled with tears. Hashknife looked at Johnny and shook his head. "I'll see yuh later," he told Johnny.

HASHKNIFE met the sheriff and Sleepy in the office. Hashknife said, "Nick, I've had a talk with Johnny and Frenchy."

"Yeah? Did yuh find out anythin' yuh already didn't know?"

"If anybody asks yuh, Nick," replied Hashknife soberly, "you can tell 'em that Dancin' Devil is in for some surprisin' things—very soon. In fact, before Christmas."

Nick McGarvin's jaw sagged a trifle. "Yuh mean—yuh know somethin', Hashknife?"

"You'd be surprised, Nick."

Leaving the sheriff to think this over, Hashknife and Sleepy walked back toward the hotel.

"He'd be surprised, eh?" remarked Sleepy.

"That's what I told him, Sleepy."

"What'd he be surprised about?"

"The few things I know, pardner. Listen, will yuh? Our only chance to find out somethin' is to scare the guilty into doin' somethin'. It works, when brains fail—and I don't mind admittin' that mine have failed."

"I know what yuh mean," said Sleepy quietly. "We paint black circles around our heads, with a bull's-eye in the middle."

"That's right. Nick's human. He'll pass the word."

"Well, all I can say is that we better find a quiet, remote spot, where we can practice dodgin' bullets," said Sleepy. "Yuh know, I think I like it better than settin' around, pardner. This ain't our idea of a good time, anyway."

"But just remember, Sleepy; we ain't dealin' with dumb rustlers in this game—but I figure that even the smartest men will get scared and make a break—when they're scared, enough."

TOMORROW night would be Christmas Eve. They brought in a big fir tree for the little church, but it seemed that the Christmas spirit was lacking. Someone told Hashknife that Thomas Colton was going to be the Santa Claus for the church celebration. The Davidsons and the Frawleys were in town, and Uncle Andy told Hashknife that Colton had asked him to make a price on the AD.

"He wanted it in a hurry, too," declared Uncle Andy. "I told him it wasn't anythin' I could hurry with."

"Did he suggest any price?" asked Hashknife.

"Well," replied Uncle Andy grimly, "he said I'd be lucky to get much more than the cost of the mortgage."

"What about Frawley?"

"He's goin' to talk to Colton this afternoon, he said."

"Tell him to hold off makin' any deal, Uncle Andy."

The little cowman looked quizzically at the tall cowboy.

"What's time got to do with it, Hashknife?" he asked.

"Well, maybe a better price. Anyway,

you've got plenty time, after the notice of foreclosure to reedem the property."

"Not with the mortgages from Colton. It specifies that when the bank shuts down on the mortgage—yo're through."

"I see. Mortgage expires—ranch gone, eh?"

"That's the only way he'll loan money, Hashknife."

A few minutes later he met Ed Frawley, who drew him aside.

"What's goin' on?" asked Frawley quietly. "A man over in the Pasatiempo told me that—well, he said somethin' was goin' to happen before Christmas—somethin' you said. At least, that's the rumor."

"I hope it's right, Frawley. Funny how things like that get in the wind."

"You mean—there's ain't anythin' to it, Hashknife?"

"*Quien sabe?*" replied Hashknife soberly. "A lot can be done in an hour—and Christmas ain't until day after tomorrow."

He found Sleepy in front of the hotel, and told him, "I reckon Nick McGarvin spread the word."

"I heard it," nodded Sleepy. "Frenchy Arnett cornered me, and wanted to know. He said, 'If yuh know who shot Chiquita—don't arrest him; just let me know who he is.' I said we would. Aw, I didn't mean it—but what else could I tell him? He ain't no deputy sheriff now—he's a wolf with the rabies, pardner."

The Davidsons and Frawleys stayed in town for supper. Hashknife and Sleepy stayed together, ate supper in a little Mexican restaurant, where they could sit against the wall. The Mexican who operated the restaurant, usually very voluble, was quiet, serving the enchiladas and frijoles hurriedly, one eye on the door.

"I wonder what he's thinkin'," remarked Sleepy.

"I wonder what he *knows*," said Hashknife. "They tell me he was Chiquita's uncle. Maybe he don't want his place messed up with us."

It was dark outside, as they paid their bill. With a hand on the knob, Hashknife drew back, turned and came back to the little counter, where the Mexican was at his cash-box.

"*Amigo*, is there a back door to this place?" he asked.

"Sure," nodded the Mexican. "Go t'rough the keetchen."

They went swiftly through the kitchen, redolent with spices and other odors, out through an old door and into the alley. There was a short, narrow alley, leading to the main street, and they could see the silhouette of a man, leaning against the right-hand wall, evidently watching for somebody. Hashknife kicked a wooden box aside, making a clatter, and the man moved quickly, stepping up on the wooden sidewalk.

Hashknife didn't hesitate, but led the way up the alley. The man had passed the little restaurant and was standing at the edge of the sidewalk just beyond. It was too dark for them to see what he looked like, except that he was tall. Finally he went on up the street toward the hotel.

"Do yuh think he was tryin' to dry-gulch us?" asked Sleepy.

"Who knows? He was waitin' for somebody, but we scared him away from the alley. He could look through the window and see that we're gone."

They went slowly up the sidewalk, watching closely, until they were at the front of the hotel. Hashknife peered through the window, as he heard Frank Olds, the hotel man, speak sharply to someone. Olds was over near the foot of the stairs, looking up toward the hallway, when he suddenly lifted his arms, shaking his head and protesting, but began walking up the stairs, both hands up.

Hashknife jerked away from the window, whispered sharply:

"Stay here! Trouble in there," and ran down the alley toward the rear stairs of the hotel.

Sleepy moved over to the open doorway of the hotel. The sheriff was crossing the street, and Sleepy said, as he came up:

"Hold it, Nick—until we hear from Hashknife."

"What's wrong?" asked the big sheriff.

"I don't know, Nick. Hashknife saw somethin' through the window, and he ran around to the back stairs. He told me to—"

Sleepy stopped, when two, closely spaced shots rattled the windows beside them. Both men sprang through the doorway, into the hotel, as a figure staggered into view,

sagged at the top of the steps and came pin-wheeling down into the lobby. Hashknife ran to the top of the stairs, gun in hand, stopped for a moment, but came on down. Behind him came the disheveled, excited hotel man, waving his arms.

The stranger was sprawled at the foot of the stairs, tall, gaunt, unkempt. Hashknife was looking down at him, as Sleepy and the sheriff came over. The excited hotel man was jabbering:

"He stuck me up, I tell yuh! Made me come up there, or he'd kill me. Hartley, how on earth did you ever beat him? He heard you comin' up the stairs. How did you beat him?"

"I didn't beat him—he missed me," said Hashknife coldly.

"That's Cass Trent!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Why he's—Hartley, there's a half-dozen rewards for this hombre. He's livin' across the border for over a year. He's a killer."

"Was," corrected Sleepy, and looked around at the crowd, swiftly gathering. The sheriff said:

"What was Cass Trent doin' here—stickin' up a hotel?"

"He wasn't stickin' me up," denied the hotel keeper. "He was goin' to bush somebody in that hallway. I came and peeked down the stairs and I seen him. I told him to git out of here, and I was goin' up and run him out—but I didn't. Man, the bore in his gun looked like a tunnel in a hill!"

"Goin' to bush somebody?" queried the sheriff. "Who?"

No one seemed to know. Nick McGarvin looked at Hashknife and found the tall, lean cowboy smiling a little. The sheriff said, "Oh," and waited for Doctor Talbert to arrive.

A search of Trent's pockets revealed five hundred dollars in currency, all in a packet, and the usual impedimentia carried by cowboys. They took the body to the doctor's place. Nick McGarvin said, "He got what was comin' to him. Hashknife—yo're cleared—and congratulations. They say Cass Trent never missed."

"They all miss sometimes, Nick," said Hashknife soberly.

"But why would he try to bush you?" asked the sheriff. "You didn't even know him."

Hashknife shook his head. "No, I didn't, and I never heard of him, until now. He was hired to kill me, Nick."

"Hired? Good gosh! Who hired him, Hashknife?"

"I can't tell yuh—'cause I'm not sure."

THE excitement was mostly over, as soon as the body was removed, but there was still a lot of discussion going on. Trent's name was well-known down there. Hashknife and Sleepy went over to the Pasatiempo Saloon, listening to the gossip. Harry Colton was at the bar, already more than half-drunk. Hashknife shoved in beside him, and Colton resented it. However, he looked at Hashknife, and decided to give him room.

Hashknife was only at the bar a few moments, when the sheriff came in. Men were asking him questions about the affair at the hotel, when Hashknife drew him aside, whispered a few words. The sheriff looked at him in amazement, but finally nodded. About a minute later the sheriff arrested Harry Colton, who tried to shove the law officer away, swearing indignantly. The incident brought a lot of attention, but the sheriff was firm.

"Harry, yuh better go peacefully," he said.

"You're crazy!" snarled the young man. "Why arrest me? What's the charge?"

"Murder," said the sheriff coldly. "You killed Chiquita Morales."

"That's a lie!"

"It's the truth, Harry. You've still got that turquoise ring. It's in yore pocket. Take it out—and deny it!"

The arrest had sobered Harry Colton. Swearing his innocence, he felt in his pocket and took out the turquoise ring. He took one good look at it and flung it at the back-bar. The next moment the big sheriff had crashed Colton against the bar and deftly handcuffed him. Harry Colton was not swearing nor protesting now, he seemed too stunned to even notice the crowd, as the sheriff led him outside. The bartender recovered the ring, and gave it to a man to give to the sheriff.

Word that Harry Colton had been arrested for the murder of Chiquita Morales spread swiftly. The sheriff was in a quandry as to what to do about Frenchy Arnett. Hashknife got Frenchy aside and explained

to him that arrest didn't mean that Harry Colton was guilty. Frenchy laughed shortly, but promised to keep his trigger-finger under control.

"I think yo're wrong, Hashknife," confided the sheriff.

"Maybe I am," admitted Hashknife, "but it'll stir things up."

"It shore will, if a mob decides to lynch Colton."

Sleepy showed up, having been on a mission, and reported quietly, "Sam Hack went to tell Thomas Colton, but he's back at the Pasatiempo. I heard Colton tell him he'd be right up to the jail."

"You stay here and keep yore eyes open, pardner," ordered Hashknife, and went swiftly up the street.

Hashknife wasn't sure of anything. When he had dropped that turquoise ring into Harry Colton's pocket, he was acting on a vague sort of hunch; a hunch that this was the time to force the issue. There was a light in the living-room of the Colton home. Colton hadn't been to the jail, Hashknife came straight to the house, so it was evident that Thomas Colton was taking his own sweet time in reacting to the arrest of his son. Hashknife circled to the rear of the house, working along a low fence, when he heard a door close quiet. A moment later someone came toward the fence, climbed over it and headed south. The man was evidently carrying something, which he lifted over the fence.

HASHKNIFE trailed him as close as he dared. The man crossed the street, far from any lights and walked swiftly down the road, which led south from Tomahawk Flats. But he only went a short distance and stopped off the road. A minute later he was coming back. Hashknife dropped flat, as the man went past him, panting a little. He saw him turn into the main street.

Hashknife saw the man was not carrying anything when he returned; so he went on in the darkness, just off the road, searching as well as he could in the darkness, and almost fell over a valise, which had been left behind a small clump of brush, only a dozen feet off the road. The heavy valise was locked, and Hashknife didn't bother to try and open it. He picked it up and went back to Colton's house, where he left the valise against the low fence.

There was a light in the house, but the blinds were down.

Hashknife tried the kitchen door and found it unlocked. Quietly he opened the door, and listened, but there was not a sound. He closed the door, moved ahead to the partly opened doorway, which opened into the living-room, stepped aside against the wall and waited for something to happen.

He had been there about ten minutes, when he faintly heard footsteps on the plank walk, which led from the street. There was a sharp knock at the front door, and then the door opened. He was unable to see who had come, but heard more than one come in. A voice called:

"Colton!"

WHEN there was no reply, he heard a man swear bitterly, damning the Colton family back several generations.

"Where the devil did he go? He never came to the jail. Yuh don't suppose—?" a voice began.

"Suppose what?" asked another man.

"Never mind. Where did Hartley go? I seen Stevens there, but I didn't see that long-legged bloodhound. That damned Trent! He made a mess of the deal. Five hundred dollars, all shot!"

"Never mind the five hundred dollars," said the other nervously. "We've got to find Colton. Don't yuh realize that Harry will talk? He ain't got the guts of a cottontail. Let's head south."

"No, we won't head no place—not till we find Colton. Damn it, we've got to find Colton! Where did that ring come from?"

"That beats me. I threw it away, I tell yuh. I heard it hit the buggy—maybe that fool Harry found it. He's half-crazy, anyway. He should have been dumped into the canyon with Regan. We'd have been safe, that's a cinch."

"Regan got what was comin' to him. Askin' the Association to send a man down here to buy ranches! Said it'd look legitimate. Legitimate—hell! They sent Hashknife Hartley. He found it out, and lost his nerve. Scared to write or wire us—came down himself, and wanted to get out of the deal."

"Never mind what happened to Regan —what'll happen to us?"

"Nothin'!" snapped the man. "Maybe we're through here, but we can live like kings in Mexico. Yuh see—"

The man stopped short. Hashknife heard the door click shut, and Colton's voice saying, "Keep your hands where they are—both of you."

"What's eatin' you, Colton?" asked one of the men anxiously.

"What did you two do with that valise?"

"Are you crazy? What valise?"

"Don't lie to me—you got it. I cached it beside the road, got Harry's horse and saddle, and when I got back there—it was gone. I'll give you ten seconds to tell me where—"

There was the sound of a scuffle, the thud of a falling body, and a voice drawled:

"Jist set right there, my fine-feathered friend! Pick up his gun, before he gits any bright ideas. Standin' on a loose rug ain't safe, Mister Colton—not when I've got m' toe through a hole in one end of it. All right, all right! This gun's easy on the trigger, my friend. Start tellin' us where yuh put the money."

"Money!" panted Colton, his voice husky. "You fools, I want to know where *you* put it. Put that gun away. Listen; I couldn't leave the money here; so I cached it along the road—in a valise—but it's gone, I tell you!"

"Ain't he a cute thing?" queried a voice sarcastically. "Why, you lyin' pup! Scared somebody'd find it! You was goin' to pull out with the money, and leave us to face the music. I've got a damn good notion to blow yore head off, Colton. Maybe I will. If you don't—"

"Sh-h-h-h-h!" hissed a voice. "Somebody comin'!"

"Git in that chair, Colton! Guns out of sight!"

Someone knocked on the door, and one of the men said, "Come in!"

Hashknife heard the door open, and a voice said, "Come in, Sheriff. Oh, Mr. Stevens, too!"

Hashknife stepped into the doorway, shoving the door wider. He could see Colton, white-faced, sitting in a chair, looking toward the doorway. He could also see part of one of the other men, and he held a gun behind him, and cocked.

"Colton, you didn't show up," Nick McGarvin said, "and—and we've got to tell yuh. Harry had a gun hidden on him some'ers—and he shot himself. No, he ain't dead, but—he-e-ey! What's this all about?"

"Set down!" rasped one of the men. "Keep yore hands in sight. All right, Colton —where's that money? Our money? Our only chance is to get out of here now—and we don't go without that money."

"I told you," husked Colton, "that somebody got it. If you two didn't——"

"You ain't lyin', Colton?"

"Would I lie—now? I'll hold these two. Get your horses, and we head for Mexico."

"Broke? Colton, I don't trust you—not a bit. Tell us where that money is, or I'll shoot yuh flat. If we can't get the money, why should we bother with you, you sneakin' coyote. Either you get that money —and we all go south—or you die here and we pull out together."

"He ain't givin' yuh much choice, Colton," said Sleepy. "Yuh might as well play square with 'em."

"Keep yore nose out of this, Stevens!" snapped one of the men. "One cinch, when we leave here—*you* won't be on our trail."

"Hashknife will," reminded Sleepy calmly. "And if yuh ask me, I don't believe yo're goin' any place. Yuh see, yuh don't know where he is."

"Hartley!" whispered Colton. "Maybe he followed me an'—"

"I'm gettin' out!" declared a man.

"Money be damned—my hide's worth more'n any money."

The man wasn't taking any chances with his partners. With his forty-five tensed at his hip, he began backing toward the doorway to the kitchen. The door was open just wide enough to let him through—but he didn't make it. A dull thud sounded, just as he was almost out of their sight, and he went right back, head down, shoulders sagging, buckled at the knees and sprawled flat onto his face, almost into the sheriff.

FOR a moment it seemed that everyone except Sleepy was off guard. Sleepy shot out of his chair and dived into one of the men, blocking his gun-hand, and the force of his dive crashed over the table, knocking the lamp off, and plunging the room into darkness. A gun flashed twice, but the spurts of flame went straight toward the ceiling. Hashknife flung the door wide open, as a man came at top speed, but the tall cowpoke dropped to his knees and the man tripped, going into the air and coming down with a crash against the old kitchen stove.

Hashknife was on him like a flash, gathering in the man's two arms.

"Light somethin', will yuh?" Sleepy was yelling. "I think this hombre is petterfied, but I'd like to be sure."

The amazed and excited McGarvin managed to light matches. Sleepy was astride Sam Hack's back, his hands locked behind him, and Sam Hack was having trouble getting enough air. McGarvin quickly handcuffed him.

"When yuh get a little time on yore hands," Hashknife called, "I could use some rope or somethin'. Better find a lamp, Nick; you'll burn yore fingers with all them matches."

Sleepy came out with a rush, lighting matches, while the sheriff found and lighted a lamp. Thomas Colton had struck his head against his own stove and was in no shape to try a getaway. They dragged him into the living-room, and stood back, panting a little. Gus Staley groaned and sat up, trying to caress his aching head. He peered at the three men, who were looking at him, groaned dismally and lay down again.

Someone had heard the two shots, which knocked shingles off the roof, and in a few moments plenty of folks were running forward. Sleepy tried to keep them back, but it was no use. Uncle Andy and Ed Frawley were there, Buck Nolan, Frenchy Arnett, and most everybody else, who could get in. The sheriff was at a loss as to what to do next; so Hashknife took charge.

"Folks, will yuh give us room, please? Gus Staley! Gus, do yuh know what I'm sayin'?"

"To hell with you!" groaned Staley. "I don't talk."

"If you don't, one of the others will. And the man who talks first gets off easiest. Shall I wait for the others?"

Gus Staley, his eyes just a bit off center, looked at the faces around him and decided to talk. He said, "I didn't do it."

"All right," said Hashknife, "we'll start from the first, Gus. You and Hack and Harry held up the bank and took all the money."

"It wasn't stealin'," whinned Staley. "Colton planned it. His idea was to break the county—and buy it back, cheap."

"And Harry wore that turquoise ring, eh?"

"He bought it from Chiquita—and forgot he had it on."

"You shot Oren Blakely, Gus."

"That's a lie!" husked Staley. "Hack killed him. He refused to go in on the deal, got scared and pulled out. Hack was afraid he'd talk. I liked Oren. Hell, I wouldn't have done it—myself."

"Why did you kill Chiquita Morales?"

"Hack got scared," whispered Staley. "Harry was a fool to wear that ring. Chiquita could have told who had it. Harry wanted to make Chiquita swear that he never had the ring, but Hack said the safest thing was to shut her month. I wasn't

there—it was Hack and Harry. Yuh can't kill women and have yore luck last."

"Who hired Trent to shoot me tonight, Staley?"

"Colton. He paid him five hundred dollars."

"Gus, we know why and how you fellers killed Regan. Wasn't he usin' the name of James Morrison?"

"Yeah—he was the syndicate—the yaller pup."

"Folks," said Hashknife wearily, "you've heard the story. I can't tell yuh any more. In fact, if Gus hadn't been scared, I couldn't have told yuh half that much."

Uncle Andy and Ed Frawley shoved their way over to the sheriff, and Uncle Andy said, "It all came too fast, Nick. Does this mean that Johnny's free?"

"Why, shore he's free. Don't paw me around—go and paw Hashknife."

But Hashknife wasn't in sight. He and Sleepy had gone through the crowd and were outside, heading for the main street. Uncle Andy went galloping past them, intent only on finding Aunt Judy and Nell Frawley. They paid their bill at the hotel. The old hotel keeper said, "Some excitement, eh? I heard there was more trouble down at Tom Colton's home. What happened down there—or don't yuh know?"

"That's right," nodded Hashknife and they walked out, smack into Aunt Judy, Nell Frawley and Uncle Andy. Uncle Andy grabbed Hashknife by the sleeve and turned him around, while Aunt Judy planted a kiss on his cheek. Not a word had been said, until Hashknife said, "Aw, gee!" He turned Aunt Judy around, facing the lights of the hotel, and she was crying.

"I thought that kiss kinda ran a little," he said. "When yuh see Nick, Uncle Andy, you tell him that valise-full of money is jist outside Colton's south fence."

"No, yuh don't!" whispered Uncle Andy. "No, yuh don't. Eddie Connors said that you two allus pull out on folks. You've got yore war-sacks with yuh—but yuh ain't goin'. Nossir, yuh ain't. This time, yuh don't go. Hashknife Hartley, tomorrow night is Christmas Eve—and you brought peace to Dancin' Devil. Johnny's free to marry Nell t'morrow night—we get our money back—and you just *try* to leave here!"

"You won't go—will you?" asked Nell, her voice choked. "You can't even think of it, Hashknife—not this time."

"Well," said Hashknife quietly, "I reckon we *can* stay."

"Can stay!" snorted Uncle Andy. "You'll stay, if I have to hog-tie yuh. You ain't the right size nor the right shape, but if Sandy Claus ever came to Dancin' Devil Valley, yo're him."

"Let's go get Johnny," said Aunt Judy quietly. "The sheriff just went down there."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy, still holding to their war-bags, stood in the hotel doorway. Frenchy Arnett came past, stopped and looked at them. Sleepy said, "How'r yuh comin', Frenchy?"

"I'm all right," replied Frenchy. "Everythin' is all right. Yuh see, Chiquita *sold* that ring; she wasn't tradin' it. Yeah, I reckon it's all right."

Frenchy went on. Sleepy said, "Well, yuh can't run away from everythin'. Maybe they'll make you best man. But tell me somethin', Tall-Feller; how'd you manage to suspect Tom Colton?"

" 'Member the first time he talked with me, Sleepy. He had a telegram from James Morrison, who turned out to be Regan. After we took this job Regan didn't have time to get a letter about us, and the telegram didn't mention who we were. But Colton said, 'After all, the Cattlemens' Association wouldn't recommend a man who wasn't capable.' How would he know who recommended us, unless he had another wire ahead of the one I read?"

"That wasn't much to go on," said Sleepy.

"It was enough," smiled Hashknife. "Maybe I better send a telegram to Bob Marsh, and tell him the ranches ain't for sale."

"Yeah, that's a good idea, pardner; and when yuh write it—give him my regards, will yuh?"

They grinned at each other, went back and registered again.

Standing Horse and the Big Buffalo Bull — They Were Both Fugitives, They Had Much in Common

THE LAST TREK

By JIM KJELGAARD

STANDING HORSE knelt behind a stump in the aspen thicket watching the white hunter stalk a little herd of buffalo. The Indian's eyes strayed toward the immense bull that led twenty cows, calves, and spike bulls, and a hunter's gleam momentarily softened the hatred stamping his face. The bull was a mighty creature. Fully six feet high at the shoulder, it weighed well over a ton. Its polished horns were nearly two feet long, and at the widest spread there was almost three feet between those horns. Standing Horse had never seen a bigger or more powerful bull.

Standing Horse turned his gaze back toward the white hunter, and he balanced the heavy Sharps in his hands as though it were a toy.

He knelt quietly behind the stump, studying the situation.

The aspen thicket was on a rock-studded rise of ground. Directly across, on another rise, the buffalo dozed in the sun and switched flies with their tails. Every few seconds the big bull raised his head to look about and to test the air currents with his nose. But the wind was blowing from him to Standing Horse, and the white hunter was crawling up a gully where he could

be neither seen nor scented. Standing Horse kept his eyes on the stalking figure.

The gully ran at an angle to the aspen thicket, and headed out on another rise perhaps seventy-five yards from the aspens and about fifty yards from the buffalo. When the white hunter reached that rise, along with the buffalo and Standing Horse, they would form a triangle. But, if this was the hunter Standing Horse sought, he would never leave that rise or have an opportunity to shoot any of the buffalo.

The Indian's face darkened. Twelve years ago, when he had first gone out with the hunters, there had been few white men and plenty of buffalo. Now there were many white men, and only a pathetic remnant of the last great buffalo herd. White men slaughtered buffalo for their hides, and left the stinking carcases to rot on the plains, but that was not why the Indian hated.

Almost without exception the white hunters who had come to slaughter the buffalo were tough and lean men who fought like demons, drank and roistered like wild spirits let loose, and shot their rifles with uncanny accuracy. They were not all bad men. Standing Horse had known many among them whom he would have called brother.

Three weeks ago a white hunter had come in peace to Standing Horse's lodge on the Kirara Creeks, and Standing Horse had welcomed him in peace. Because Standing Horse had had no thought of battle, the white hunter was able to club him over the head with the barrel of his rifle. Standing Horse had awakened to find his sobbing and desecrated wife kneeling on the floor of the lodge. He had sent her north, into the wild hills where white men never went because there were no buffalo. He himself had set out on the hunt.

Lying in ambush, crawling unseen close to their camps, and even venturing into their wagon camps, Standing Horse had looked into the faces of a great many white men. He was not a wanton killer, and it was necessary that he find the right white man. He would know when he found him; the face of the white hunter who had dared desecrate his lodge was burned into the Indian's brain.

The white man started up the rise. Carefully, making no noise, lifting his rifle ahead of him, he advanced to that point where he could shoot the buffalo—he must have located them from some other rise of ground. A barely perceptible tremor ran through Standing Horse's lean body. He sensed this was the white man he sought, but he had to be sure. Holding his Sharps in both hands, Standing Horse stepped out of concealment and said sharply:

"Ho!"

The white man stopped, and turned, and when he turned Standing Horse knew that this was the white man he sought. He shouted:

"It is I, Standing Horse! It is you who entered my lodge on the Kirara Creeks! Be ready to die, white man!"

Standing Horse waited until the white man rose to a kneeling position. Then, when the advantage was equal, Standing Horse raised his rifle and shot. The white man's rifle jerked from his hands. The white man thudded heavily forward.

Standing Horse walked over to where he lay. Calmly, methodically, he went about his work. He knelt, and when he rose the white man's scalp was in his hand. Standing Horse dropped it into the pouch at his side and, making no effort at concealment, he walked openly away from the place. When he came to a willow-lined gully down which a creek coursed, he waited in the willows until that hour which lingers just before night closes down. When he walked on he went in a straight line, knowing exactly where he was going, and from the top of another rise he saw the buffalo hunter's camp.

Openly, carrying his rifle at his side, Standing Horse walked into the camp. Three bearded white men, two with rifles in their hands and one cooking strips of buffalo hump over a fire, watched him suspiciously. Standing Horse sat down, laying his rifle on the ground beside him, and presently the two white men leaned their rifles against the wheels of their wagon. Tethered mules and buffalo horses stamped and snorted in the semi-darkness. Suddenly Standing Horse's rifle was again in his hands, covering the white men who watched silently.

"I do not wish to shoot," the Indian said, "but I will shoot if you do not listen. A white hunter came to my lodge. I received him in peace, and he bit like a hidden

snake. Here"—Standing Horse took the scalp from his pouch and threw it on the ground—"is proof that I have avenged my young wife and she need weep with shame no longer. Tell them, tell all white men, that I, Standing Horse, killed this white man!"

Standing Horse faded like a wraith into the darkness, and behind him the three big Sharps blasted their futile message into the night.

THE big buffalo bull had come a long way. While the deep snows lay on the ground he had wintered, along with a thousand other buffalo which sometimes joined in one big herd but most times remained scattered in small herds, in some sheltered valleys a hundred miles to the south. With spring the buffalo hunters had come back to throw a ring of steel around the last big herd of wild buffalo left in the world.

The big bull became aware of their arrival one day when scattered patches of snow still lay like splashes of white paint among the green grass and flowers that were already beginning to come up. A half-dozen of the small herds had drifted together, and about a hundred buffalo stood or lay on the floor of one of the sheltered valleys when a Sharps boomed. Standing on the outer rim of the herd, a little apart from the rest, a cow grunted, slumped to her knees, and rolled over to lay still. Seeing no enemy, the remainder of the herd either remained as they were or, at the best, tossed uneasy heads. The Sharps cracked again, and this time a young bull standing near the great bull bawled in agony. He took a few faltering steps, lay down, bawled again, and was still.

It was that which awakened in the great bull instincts and senses which had lain dormant throughout a peaceful winter. Even before he started on this trek he had come a long way, clear from the railroad which bisected a continent and which had divided the buffalo into two great herds. The herd to the south of the railroad had already been wiped out, and hunters had come north. Every mile of the way the bull had travelled was a mile of peril and terror. Hunters lurked at every crossing and every waterhole, and numberless of those companions with which the bull had started lay stripped and rotting on the line of march. The great bull had escaped partly because he was wiser than the rest and partly because he was luckier.

Before the Sharps blasted a third time, the great bull was running. As he ran, there gathered about him those cows, calves, and spike bulls with which he had grazed all winter and which had become his natural companions. When the bull's little clique started, the remainder of the herd took panic and ran with them. A snorting, pounding wave of immense wild oxen, they raced away from the rifle and left their two companions dead on the ground.

Only, when the rest of the herd stopped, the great bull travelled on and his own herd travelled with him. Until night fell, in the far distance the uneasy bull heard the booming of Sharps. With the night, they stopped to graze along an aspen-shaded creek. When morning came the bull resumed his trek.

It was a grazing march rather than a steady pace, and the big bull led his herd northward. In the south, where the bull had spent the first years of his life, there were too many hunters, too many booming rifles, too much terror. The bull would never go back there.

Because the big bull was not following any of the usual buffalo tracks, and hunters had not yet penetrated this part of the country, for a while the trek was a peaceful one. The herd travelled on, grazing when hunger demanded that they graze and resting when they were tired. The smash of Standing Horse's rifle was the first shot the bull had heard in more than a week, and even before he heard it—as soon as Standing Horse shouted—he started to run.

He led his herd down the rise of ground upon which it had been resting, and into the willow-lined shelter of another creek bottom. There the bull stopped. He bent his massive head to the green grass that grew among the willows, browsed a bit, and looked nervously up. So far off that he could not even be certain it was real, he smelled the smoke of a buffalo hunter's fire. The bull pawed the earth with a huge hoof and rumbled low in his throat. A great uneasiness and uncertainty possessed him. He wandered to the creek, drank, and led his herd up the creek's sluggish course.

There were willows on both sides, and as long as the bull was concealed by them he felt reasonably safe. Suddenly he stopped again.

Now, and definitely, he did smell a hunter's fire. The bull could not know it, but the main body of the last great herd of buffalo had also trekked north, then swung west, and the eager hunters were following them. The course the bull had chosen was leading him directly into the main herd, and once again he would have to run the gauntlet of rifles with which that herd was rapidly being surrounded.

Nervously he glanced at the gently sloping and almost treeless banks of the creek up which he travelled, and remained where he was. His head was bent, his eyes half-closed, and the little herd that trailed him began cropping at the grass which grew among the willows. The bull was afraid to go on. There seemed to be no immediate danger here, so he would stay here.

With night he moved again, remaining between the willows that lined the creek banks and occasionally taking to the water. He did not stop to graze or rest, but maintained a steady pace that carried him up the creek to where that creek became a swampy trickle at the foot of a ridge. Twice in the night he saw more hunters' fires, and when he climbed the ridge at the head of the creek he saw a fire winking like a distant star that, somehow, had fallen to earth. The bull's nervousness increased. This was a section of gently rolling hills that were covered with rich grass and occasional clumps of sagebrush, but there was nothing else. The bull did not like it because there were no trees or brush in which he might hide.

Morning broke dully in a clouded sky, and the bull veered sharply from the course he had set himself to swing east. He was thirsty, and the faint wind that sighed from the east carried the scent of water with it. The bull threaded his way among the rolling hills, climbing to their tops when he had to, but staying in the gullys whenever he could. He knew the dangers of the skyline. The bull went down a gully and saw the waterhole.

It was a brackish pond that nestled forlornly in an unprepossessing hollow, and the bull stopped because some innate sense warned him of peril. The carcases of a dozen buffalo lay about the waterhole, and a swollen cow floated in it. The bull's herd trooped past to water, and still the bull remained where he was. A little spike bull drank. Half the herd lined up to drink beside him. Suddenly the little spike bull retched. Turning, he staggered towards the great bull. Then he fell to his knees, retaining that posture as though he had somehow been frozen there.

The big bull wheeled and pounded away, but only eight of his herd followed him from the poisoned waterhole.

STANDING HORSE knew that if he were sighted by any white man he would be killed with no more mercy than that accorded a rabid dog or rattlesnake. Still, even though he might have left the white man he had shot and been a long distance away by the time the killing was discovered, he did not think himself a fool because of what he had done. A warrior's honor demanded that all white men understand just why Standing Horse had killed and that he had extracted full vengeance.

He ran into the night, but as soon as he was outside the circle of light cast by the buffalo hunters' fire, he veered sharply at right angles to the direction he had taken. He heard the booming Sharps in the camp, and saw red tongues of fire from the big rifles lick hungrily at the clinging night. Standing Horse slowed to a fast walk.

Until now, he had planned only on finding the white man he had set out to kill, killing him, and letting other white men know that he had been killed. Now he could give all thought to his own escape, and he knew it would be difficult.

The white men were terrible in their fury when one of their own number was killed by an Indian, and they would not be satisfied with a mere blind search or with hoping to cut him off. They would get a tracker, probably a renegade of his own race, and a select posse of crack-shot buffalo hunters would accompany the tracker. In addition, every hunter that could be reached would be alerted.

Standing Horse thought of the incredible skill of some trackers at the white men's command. A blade of trampled grass, a broken twig, a displaced bit of dirt, a stone that did not rest in its ordinary bed, and a

thousand other signs could tell a complete story to a good tracker. Standing Horse knew that he would have to exercise all the skill at his command if he would even delay the posse.

He still contemplated the situation calmly because, even before he had set out to kill a white man, he had known that this must be the inevitable aftermath if he was successful.

There were two courses open. He could reach the northern hills, where white men never went because there were no buffalo there, rejoin his wife, and be safe. Nothing less than a small army of white men would dare enter the hills to hunt him down because there were also too many Indians who had fled to those hills after disagreeing with white men, and they all had good rifles. If he did not reach the hills, if the posse caught him, Standing Horse would fight as hard as he could and take as many of the enemy as possible with him before he finally went down. Since the situation was as simple as that, there was no reason to become excited.

He had as many hours' start as the night was long because not even an Indian tracker could follow a trail in darkness, and as soon as he was far enough away from the buffalo hunters' camp Standing Horse veered sharply west. He still did not hurry because, in the days to come, he might have sore need of all his strength and all his resources. It was well to conserve them until that day came. At a fast walk, Standing Horse travelled an hour and a half to the sloping banks of a little stream. For a moment he stood, looking at the stars that shone whitely in a pale sky. Then he jumped from the bank into that waist deep center of the stream and waded north.

He knew that at the best it was a delaying gesture. A tracker need only come to the stream, determine that Standing Horse had not crossed, and go either up or down stream until he found where the man he sought had left it. Being an Indian tracker, knowing that most Indians who were in trouble with the white men sought a refuge in the northern hills, the tracker would probably turn north first. Taking to the water was still a delaying tactic.

HE CAME to a high-banked canyon where some pine trees grew, and one of the pines had fallen across the stream. Its needles were dried and crisp, its trunk a lichen-encrusted bridge bristling with spikes of branches. He drew himself up, walked to the bank, and leaped lightly from the tree. Standing Horse climbed the gorge's side and started north through the darkness.

Daylight found him far to the north, and here the rolling ridges were a little higher and steeper, with more trees. Far to the east a Sharps boomed. There was another shot, then a volley. Several hunters must have surrounded a herd of buffalo and were shooting them down. Standing Horse dropped into swale and followed its contours northward. When he came to the ridge where the swale headed out he crawled up to peep over before going on.

A quarter of a mile away, a hunter on a brown buffalo horse was riding in search of more buffalo. Standing Horse remained where he was until the hunter went out of sight, then crawled over the ridge and into another gully. His big Sharps he held in both hands now; buffalo hunters might be anywhere. Standing Horse stopped to cut a huge steak from a recently killed buffalo whose stripped carcase lay on the side of a ridge. He went on to a grove of trees, stopped to eat some of the raw meat, and curled up at the base of a tree to sleep.

WHEN the first evening shadows cast their long fingers across the ground he went on, but this was a broken and ragged country of many sluggish creeks and he could not make good time. He stopped in the middle of the night to scoop dirt from the bottom of a creek, build a cairn in the water, and make a small fire on it. Standing Horse cooked some of his buffalo meat, then pushed the cairn with its dead ashes back into the creek. He travelled on.

With dawn's first light he heard the booming of rifles all about. The main part of the buffalo herd had come this far, and hunters in force had found them. Standing Horse stalked to the top of a ridge, and from that vantage point he looked down to see a small herd of running buffalo. Three hunters on buffalo horses pursued them, shooting as they rode, re-loading at full

gallop, and riding on to shoot again. For two miles the path they had taken was marked by buffalo carcases. Another hunter came from the west, rode at the herd, and turned it. From all directions, rifles and revolvers roared and cracked incessantly.

Standing Horse crawled to a grove of trees, entered it, and composed himself. He could not go on, and the trackers who were certainly coming from the rear would have a chance to catch him. Standing Horse turned so he could see his back track, and made ready to fight should fighting be necessary. But that day the pursuers did not come, and with night Standing Horse slipped past the hunters.

The next morning the only shots he heard were to the south; he had gone past the herd and most of the hunters. Very far to the north he saw the snow-clad peaks of the mountains he was trying to reach. Standing Horse walked swiftly on, stopping only to catch and eat a fish.

The country here was more rugged. Mountain-fed, the streams were swifter. There were more evergreen trees, fewer aspens and cottonwoods. Standing Horse walked more freely now, more easily. One more day would put him in the mountains and certain safety, but he was not yet safe. He dipped into a rock-walled canyon down which a tumbling stream flowed, and started up the canyon. Standing Horse marvelled. He had heard of country such as this, but he had never been in it. The canyon walls were high and steep, sheer rock. At various places evergreen trees had found a rooting in the rock, and the canyon floor was thickly clothed with trees. It was a good place to be. If one must meet an enemy, it would be well to meet him here. For the first time since he had started his trek, Standing Horse slept peacefully.

With morning's dim light, he went on to the head of the canyon. Unlike the sides, the head was gently-sloping. A wide meadow stretched from it to the distant hills, and saplings grew well out into the meadow. Cautiously Standing Horse parted those saplings. He looked out, and slunk carefully back. He saw the six horses of the buffalo hunters who guarded the head of the canyon, and the hunters themselves. Standing Horse stalked back into the canyon; he knew the other end would be guarded too and he had seen no place where it was possible to climb the walls. The fight was at hand.

He was ready for it.

THE big bull led his small herd over the rolling ridges and almost directly north. Within him now was a great weariness, but also a great urgency. He could not stay so he must keep moving, and the horror that lived in the south would not permit his turning back there. The north drew him like a magnet.

He came to a small creek, drank, and moved restlessly on. Now all normal routine, everything the bull would have done had not fear and terror lived in his brain, was subjugated to the powerful instinct to move, to get away from everything he had known. He walked on, seemingly at a slow gait. But a coyote that moved in the grass and for a little way trotted parallel to the herd's course was soon left behind. The buffalo seemed to go slowly only because they were huge. For two hours just before nightfall the herd grazed and rested. Then, the bull's nervousness communicating itself to the rest, they moved again. In the middle of the night they stopped once more to browse, and to get relief from the weary trek, but no buffalo lay down.

The great bull kept his herd in the sheltered gullys and swales, mounting over the rises only when he had to. It was while they were on top of a rise that two buffalo hunters on fast horses saw them and spurred to the hunt.

The big bull started to run, head low and hooves flying. A light calf sped past him, but the rest of the herd dutifully followed in the rear. The big bull heard the boom of a Sharps, then another. The smashing reports of the rifles were followed by the cracking of revolvers. The big bull knew that, except for the skipping calf, he was alone. The calf stepped in a badger hole, fell, and his heels flew in the air. His head bent beneath him, his body rolled over on it. There came the crack of a snapping vertebra and the calf lay still.

The big bull raced on, aware of hoofbeats behind him and just as aware that they were not the pound-pound of buffalo hooves. His weary tongue lolled from his open mouth, great greasy strips of saliva

flew back to lather his sides. He heard the crack of the gun, and felt the bullet stab like a headless lance high into his right shoulder. The sun, behind him, had the bobbing shadow of the pursuing horse play a macabre game of tag with his own shadow. Suddenly, and lightly, the big bull whirled.

He did it in sheer fury, outright killing rage. For hundreds of miles he had trekked, his only thought to escape the implacable hunters. Now his weariness, his desperation, and the torture he had endured, were no longer bearable. He caught the horse squarely under its belly, and the horse's shrill terror was neighed through an open mouth. The horse dropped heavily to its side, pinning the rider beneath it.

The big bull ran on, alone and pain-ridden but eager to continue. He trotted over the side of a gully and patiently traveled his northward way. Within him now was something that had never been there before. Save for fights with other bulls, or joining with other bulls to help beat off the great prairie wolves that sometimes came in packs to prey on buffalo calves, the big bull had never been a warrior.

The trek north had made him a crafty creature and now he had become belligerent. He had tried to run, but running had brought him near disaster. Henceforth, if cornered, he would fight.

He continued northward, stopping only when it was absolutely necessary to eat, drink, or rest. Late one night, far to the north, he stopped when he saw three men sitting beside a fire. The bull pawed the earth, and again felt unaccustomed rage rise within him. Directly in his line of march, the men remained beside the fire. Caution came to the bull's aid.

The night was his friend, the terror that had come to the land stalked only by day. Cautiously the bull slunk past the men into a high-walled canyon down which a creek tumbled. Steadily he made his way through the canyon, and morning had come again when more men blocked his path.

The big bull walked carefully now, cautiously threading his way among the trees and watching. To one side of the canyon, crouching on a ledge five feet up the wall —a good shooting position—was another man.

But that man was not in his trek line and the six at the head of the canyon were. They stood in a little group, talking animatedly among themselves, and the great bull was well out into the saplings before he was noticed. For a moment—they were used to seeing buffalo run away—the men watched curiously. Then, when a bearded man tried to jerk a Sharps to his shoulder, it was too late. The bull struck.

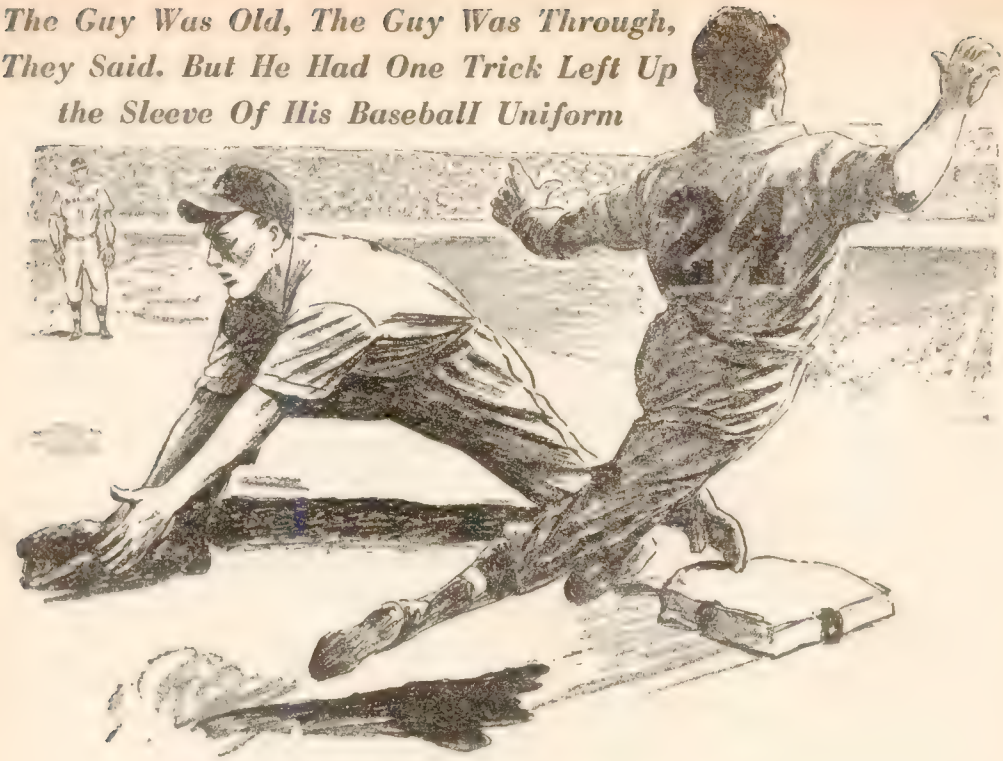
His ton of muscle was propelled by fury, memory of countless outrages, and the pain that was like a fire in his shoulder. His great head smashed the group, and the bull shook off one man that was impaled on his horns. The rest, except for one, tumbled like ten-pins hit by an expertly rolled ball. The bull did not look back.

He seemed very near his goal.

BACK in the canyon, Standing Horse waited until the one man who was not hurt helped the four who were to their saddles. The dead man was strapped across his horse, then all the men and horses were gone. Standing Horse waited another hour before he came out of the canyon. He stood in the open meadow, exposing himself freely. There was no shot. Nothing stirred. He could walk as he pleased.

He must hurry and get into the hills, so he could tell the other Indians there about the great bull. He was their friend. He must not be harmed. He could live the rest of his days in peace, comfort and plenty, and he would not be alone. Certainly they would be few, but there would be more refugees of the great bull's own kind coming over that lonely trek route.

The Guy Was Old, The Guy Was Through, They Said. But He Had One Trick Left Up the Sleeve Of His Baseball Uniform



Now Batting For The Broncos . . . . .

By MALCOLM MURCHIE

Author of "Minor League Marvel," etc.

ROOSTER EVANS was with the Broncos because the Horses were lean on fly-chasers. And the Broncs were in the World Series because, despite that shortage of outfielders, which had not been, said the papers, "noticeably relieved by the addition of Rooster Evans," they had a good, well-balanced ball club.

Frank Ferris, the MGR, was a Bronco system man. He'd been mellowed and aged out on the far-flung farm system that included triple A down to the lowliest of the sticks. President J. C. Seith, a large, florid-faced man who often wore top hat and striped pants into the owner's box, was said by his enemies to be "all business" with the sentiment of a rhinocerous which he more than slightly resembled. But his backers claimed he'd done a lot for the Little Horses, that he'd given up the old baseball policy of trying to buy or trade for his team. Instead, Seith believed in the farm-system idea. If people had fretted during the development years of such a system, now they were generous with huzzahs. For the Ponies had their first pennant in sixteen years, a long-enough time for a whole new brigade of Horse rooters to have grown up, found their way into Bronco Field, and learned to

recognize the new players even without a scorecard.

The Rooster was a refutation of all things the new Seith administration stood for. He'd never been in the Horses' system anywhere. But when Ferris looked around at midseason and seen what he'd seen—only three able-bodied fly-chasers—Evans, a free agent, had been signed up as fast as the front office could make phone connections.

It was far from the ideal solution . . . in fact, the baseball boys who followed the fortunes of the Broncs insisted rather unkindly that it was worse than no solution, but pennant chasers can't be choosers.

Looking at the whole thing objectively, the deal was no bargain. Evans was thirty-nine. For doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief, thirty-nine is just beginning. But for a ballplayer that's two feet and one arm in the grave. Everybody, even the reporters who labeled anything Evans did with his age, as much as to say, "Look, this old coot, age 39, got a double!" admitted that the Rooster had an arm. And he could still hit. But he'd left his legs in a thousand hook slides, in ten thousand sprints down first-base lines and outfield chases after far-flung flies.

WHAT was left of Rooster Evans arrived at Bronco Field in mid-August. Whatta Bird, as some of the more frivolous columnists called him, was as nondescript as a batting-practice baseball and just about as marked up. He was medium sized, medium height and build with sandy hair that disguised the first traces of temple gray. He had eyes made for squinting into the brilliance of some sun field, their corners crinkled good-humoredly. Only Evans' hands were extraordinary. They were big and scarred, knobby-knuckled and strong-fingered. They clasped and unclasped a good deal as though gripping an unseen bat or getting hold of an invisible ball.

That Evans once had it was indisputable. He still carried a lifetime batting average of over .300, despite the last few years of dwindling base hits. He'd been a good defensive fielder with a great arm. But it was his fence-busting past that had interested the desperate Horse management.

"A guy who can step up there every now and then and belt that old potato, that's what we need," pilot Frank Ferris had told Seith. "If he can run around out there in the outer pasture for a few innings to relieve one of my regulars, so much the better. But I need somebody on the bench."

John Horace Evans, known as nothing but Rooster since that day just about twenty years ago when he'd first attracted atten-

tion by going "five for five" in the Peoria league, was it. Big-league teams go after the material of baseball—its players—with as much energy and even more imagination than they go after the victories on the field. It is a twentieth-century diamond fact that the one, in truth, follows the other.

Doc Byrd, father to all the multitudinous afflictions, real and imagined, that a major-league squad of twenty-five can fall heir to, wagged his head with some concern on hearing of the new acquisition.

Like the romantic affairs of Hollywood, ballplayers' ailments are in the public domain. There was the Evans rib that had been cracked racing over into some field boxes somewhere. It had never healed right. And hadn't there been a concussion, the result of a beaning a couple of seasons ago? But most of all—ran Doc Byrd's information—were those calcified knees. Things like that give a man the misery all the time. They take the speed out of him, the power and drive.

When Evans arrived in the middle of the summer, President Seith, Ferris, the rest of the squad and the gentlemen of the press were not overly impressed. He ran as though there were a sharp-end-up tack in each shoe. He swung at the plate as though he'd busted that rib last week and not three years ago. All in all, he looked thoroughly like a thirty-nine-year-old ballplayer . . . which was what he was, and that was all.

But there was something else that nobody else noticed besides Doc Byrd, though. A look in the eye—sounds like one of those mushy stories, doesn't it—but it's so—a look of determination. A look that Byrd noticed and filed away along with the medical details of more definite and physical things.

THE calcium in Rooster's joints didn't slow the Broncos down. With their bell cow, Fireball Andy Garms, who had a steel catapult for an arm and enough stuff and control to make even the oldtimers scratch their heads and "allow as how he *might* be good enough to carry Walter Johnson's glove," the Ponies held their two or three-game lead down to the wire at September's end.

Manager Ferris let Evans go to the outfield just often enough to know his way around out there and get unhitched from the bench. He kept him out there just long enough to give one or another of the regulars a chance to get over a strawberry or ptomaine or what have you.

In these but occasional showings the Rooster did nothing spectacular—either good or bad. He made the required catches, did throw a few ambitious base stealers out trying to stretch their hits.

At bat the Rooster broke no fences. He was thrown out on at least three balls, hit so deep to short that most anybody's grandmother could have made first before the ball. And he grimaced when he ran so's, as one of the other boys put it, "everybody'll know how much it hurts."

"We might've done a lot better going to one of our farms for an outfielder," President Seith remarked to Ferris. "Hate to think what would've happened if we'd had to play that Evans regularly."

No one argued that one. Still Ferris knew it was a long-standing policy of Seith's, whose bark was sometimes worse than his bite, not to raid the farms in the course of a season. And as a matter of honest record there was no overpowering outfield talent on any of the Pony junior clubs. No, any way you looked—and baseball men can look in more directions and angles than any other varmit—Evans at worst was the best the Broncs could do. If Doc Byrd had any additional thoughts, he kept them to himself, his heat machines, his adhesive tape and arnica.

Along with the battered suitcase that, like its owner, had seen better days, Evans arrived and announced "present" at the next clubhouse meeting. Observers, watching the oldster work out in those mid-summer days, offered the view that the thirty-nine-year-old fly-chaser didn't seem to "have" very much. But the Rooster always seemed to do better in regular games, which is the professional stamp. And if he was nothing else, Evans was a "professional."

But with a regular picket line of Burns, Whittaker and Docella, Pilot Ferris looked upon Evans as merely insurance that would, hopefully, not have to be cashed in.

The other league winners were the powerful Blue Sox. The Sox had the pitching, they had the punch, they had a bench that—the experts swore—was strong enough to

win the pennant by itself and they had Jo-Jo Neill, one of the smartest managers in the game.

ONE of the moves that Neill planned, it developed, was the throwing of some high calibre right-hand pitching at the predominantly right-hand-hitting Broncs. Ferris' ace hurler, Garms, on the other hand, a righty, was to be faced with the Blue's left-hand hitting strength.

In the first game, played at Bronco Field before an overflow crowd, Neill's stratagem worked out. The Sox left-handed sluggers got eight hits off Garms, three of the extra-base variety and the four runs this added up to was enough as Pony batting strength fizzled dismally. The post-mortem department fretted over right-field Joe Docella who had bruised his shoulder severely headlonging into second. Evans went to right for the last two innings and succeeded only in connecting with the right-field barrier instead of the ball on one line drive that went for a triple and added up to the Sox final run. At his turn at bat, Evans had grounded to short and was an easy out. Several reporters rode him because he'd not even run down to first.

"He's more Chicken than Rooster," one column sizzled.

It was a tough one to lose; to lead with your ace and have him trumped. It did not improve Bronco tempers. Especially because Neill had something to play with that the Broncos did not. That talent-packed bench that enabled him to shuffle his lineup around and get maximum strength, right or left, regardless of who threw them in for the Ponies was a capital A asset. Frank Ferris, on the other hand, had to go with his eight or ten regulars, exclusive of pitching changes.

The night after that 4-1 Blue Sox win, the lights burned late in the Bronco clubhouse as President Seith, Manager Ferris and the coaches turned the situation over in their minds. But the conclusion was always the same.

"We haven't got the manpower," Ferris sighed. "We've got two left-handed hitting ballplayers on this club and one of them, Joe Docella, might as well be out in the three-eye league for all the good he's going to do us with that shoulder."

"Your other lefty is Evans?" It was a rhetorical question from Seith.

Ferris nodded his head dismally. "You know, in spite of the age of that fellow and the funny remarks of the newspaper men, I kept thinking the Rooster would be able to get a few licks in for us. But he sure looked terrible this afternoon."

Smith flicked cigar ash on the floor. "Noticed he ran into the wall after that drive in the eighth. Didn't hurt himself, did he?"

"You know these ballplayers. If they get a scratch, they run to the medic. I asked Byrd afterward. He said Evans didn't even show up for his usual knee-baking after the game. No, I'm afraid he's just doggin' it out there. But what am I gonna do? We could take Laney off third . . ."

Seith and the other coaches looked dismal at that.

"Then I'll have to go along with the Rooster tomorrow. And by God I'll fine him outta the league if he doesn't run those rollers out."

Seith wagged his head in agreement. "Doesn't look good to see a man dog it that way."

FERRIS' route from the club offices to the subway that would take him to his suburban home went past a night spot not far from the ball park. The windows were open to the balmy October night and jukebox noises filled the air. The manager's eyes automatically turned into the tavern as he came abreast. He stopped abruptly, his casual gaze made suddenly less casual by a familiar figure. The man was leaning on the bar, his shoulders slouched forward, holding in big, knobby hands a beer schooner. Ferris, feeling the hot blood in his face, wheeled abruptly in at the door. Ignoring all else, he strode over to the bar and put a heavy hand on Evans' shoulder.

The manager tried to control himself when he spoke, but the words were choked with wrath. "Evans, get your hat, get out of here and go home! It's after one a.m., a heluva time to find a Series ballplayer in a pub!"

The Rooster looked at him with those brown-flecked eyes of his. The eyes did not look drunk, but the outfielder offered no word in his own defense. He tossed

some change on the bar and headed for the door. With a hollow sickness in the pit of his stomach, Ferris noted that Evans had some trouble walking, staggering slightly as he took the first step.

Outside, the manager walked swiftly away himself. "This's gotta happen to me," he moaned. "On the eve of another Series game. And my right fielder's hitting the spots. Great!"

The next day Frank Ferris was of two minds. Perhaps, after all, he should yank Laney off third and send him to the outfield. But a moment's consideration convinced him that it wouldn't do. To weaken a good infield, to plug the picket line was like that old one about robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Evans was suited up early. Doc Byrd, from whom Frank tried to glean some information as to the Rooster's condition, said only that Evans had by-passed the pre-game rubdown and heat treatments and was in his uniform even before he, Byrd, got into the clubhouse.

The Rooster played an undistinguished game for the Broncos, but in that second series tilt, the Ponies were on. Knowing that another defeat would just about put them away in the best-four-out-of-seven series, Ferris' men ran 'em out all the way. Not that the Blue Sox were any bed of roses.

But three runs in early innings garnered by Whittaker and Burns homers stood up all the way in for a 3-2 Bronc win, squaring the record. Evans flied out deep twice, hit a long single off the center field which anyone else wouldn't have made second on and fouled out to the catcher. In the field, he had no chances, although some of the boys fumed that he should've been over backing up centerfielder, Whittaker, on a couple of hits.

Pilot Frank Ferris took Doc Byrd aside as the triumphant Broncs headed for the clubhouse. In the back of his mind was the thought and positive knowledge that if Docella didn't come around, he'd have to keep going with the Rooster.

"Get next to him, Doc. You're a great hand with the gang. Try to make this Evans see he's letting down the whole squad and himself by doggin' it. See if you can't light a fire under the guy, wake 'im up."

FERRIS said nothing to the Bronc medic about the previous night's episode at the tavern, but looking into the MGR's eyes, Byrd saw the deep worry there and knew something was up.

There was an open Monday then, and the World Series moved for games Three, Four and Five over to Blue Sox Bowl. Ferris spent the day fretting over pitching assignments and other strategy. Late in the day, his hotel-room phone jangled. It was Doc Byrd. It seemed that Joe Docella insisted upon being counted in for the morrow.

"I can't guarantee that shoulder, Frank. But Joe is hot to play. It's a pretty big chance . . . up to you."

Ferris murmured a prayer of thanks. Almost as an afterthought he asked about Rooster Evans.

"Haven't seen him," the Doc admitted. "He was dressed and out of the clubhouse yesterday before I could talk to him. I guess he doesn't think much of the treatment I was giving his knees. Evidently he's going it alone."

Docella played six innings of the third game, but it didn't make any difference. Before a capacity mob, the Sox sockers raked four of Ferris' pitchers for an 11-3 triumph. With Docella showing definite signs of discomfort, Frank benched him, sent Laney out to right and put a Joe Substitute on third. Rooster Evans sat on the bench throughout, speaking to no one, drawing no remarks from any of his disconsolate teammates. Once at a spot in the eighth when Ferris was looking up and down the bench for a pinch-hitter, Doc Byrd thought he noticed the Rooster squirmed uneasily, but the MGR's eyes went right by the veteran fly-chaser.

The fourth game, at Blue Sox Bowl, saw Garms pitch one of his typically competent games. But Fireball Andy was behind 1-0 in the top of the eighth as the Blue Sox right-hand pitching strength continued to stymie Bronco right-sided batting. Ferris sent a pinch-hitter up to the plate for Garms, a notoriously weak batter even for a pitcher, but the Ponies got nowhere. In the last of the eighth the Sox teed off on Garms' relief for four runs, opening up a 5-0 margin.

In the visitors' ninth with two out and two on, the Pony pilot sent up Evans to pinch-hit. The veteran fouled off two sliders

and then sent a trickler down the third-base line. The Sox infield was playing the Rooster way over toward right, and the hot-corner's tenant was nearly at short. A roar went up from the crowd; it looked like a safe hit for Evans which would fill the bases. But the Rooster, watching the flight of the ball, took merely a token number of steps toward first, stopping not halfway down the line. With this reprieve, the third baseman had time to rifle the ball over for the final out. The scattering of boos from the Bronc rooters was drowned out by the victory roar of the Blue Sox throng. It was doubtful if the Rooster noticed the black looks of his own bench as he walked with head down toward the clubhouse.

BYRD thought Evens looked very old as he trudged along, dangling his glove. The morning papers blistered the Broncos, individually and collectively. Frank Ferris' strategy was held up to ridicule as any losing strategy is, but most of all Bronco sympathizers put the Pony high command on the griddle for having to use someone like Rooster Evans.

"Evans was washed up five years ago," one blistering editorial ran. "His pathetic, inept, and listless play is no more or less than might have been anticipated. Instead of bringing up some desperately needed first class or second class or even third class reserve strength, the Broncs pulled this clinker of a deal. Yes, President Seith, the Rooster is a Turkey! And the joke—and Series defeat—is going to be on *you!*" Other journalistic comments were equally unkind.

For himself, it was whispered that Frank Ferris did not care one bit more than a pilot who'd lost three out of the first four Series games usually does. There were well-founded rumors that Ferris' next move would be "upstairs" into an even better position with the Bronc organization. It was probably true that his next year's bread and butter didn't depend on winning the big series. But there was nothing casual about the MGR's attitude. He was an organization man, a Bronco man from way back, and any baseball greenhorn knows that nobody survives that long in the Seith setup if he doesn't have the winning urge.

Ferris set himself for another all-night session with his coaches and Doc Byrd who supplied those little twists of psychology that often transferred themselves into victories on the playing field. On his way with Byrd from the field to an eating place before the scheduled evening meeting, the two Bronc baseball men came across a familiar face.

THE town, as always at Series time, was filled with diamond big-wigs and little-wigs. Herman Weiner was in the latter class. He was a small man; thin, etched face with big questing eyes. His body was too bowed for his years. Weiner hadn't been well, and that frailty had kept him from a possible big-league managerial career, for he knew baseball and things that made a winner. And he was up on a Who's Who of the diamond like the guy who invented the encyclopedia. The three found a table together.

"Rooster Evans," mused Herman, reaching for a roll. "I saw you had him, Frank. A great ball player, one of the greatest."

Ferris started to snort, but Weiner raised his hand.

"No wait, wait a minute. I know the roasting you've been taking about him and that he's not come through for you. But he's got it here," and Herman laid a hand on his heart.

Ferris could not suppress a sniff. "Well, I don't see it. He's been worse than nothing so far. And damn it, I have to use him more than I'd wanted to, with Docella not himself."

Weiner smiled in that way he had. "You'll see, Frank. 'Course, he's no cub, not at thirty-nine. The legs, the arm, the old pep . . . but in the heart and head, he's okay."

They talked of other things then and when Ferris grabbed the check and went over to the cashier to pay, Dr. Byrd took the opportunity to ask a question of Weiner.

"Why sure, I had the Rooster, let me see, at Columbus I think it was. What? Drink? Hell no, Doc. Oh, maybe one beer once in a while, but nothing more. And I'll tell you why. This Rooster, believe me, I've had the long talks with him. You get to know a guy that way. He doesn't know anything else in the world but baseball, Doc. That's all for him. He loves the game. He wouldn't louse

himself up with old alky. Yeah, he loves baseball, Doc. Life begins and ends for him with that."

Then Ferris was back and they were walking into the street. Herman wished the Bronco men good luck and was gone.

"Knows plenty baseball, that guy. It's tough the breaks some men get . . . but he's sure got a wrong slant on that Evans, huh?"

Byrd didn't answer. He was thinking.

The next day was gray, cheerless, like the news about Docella.

"Joe's through for the Series. I'm sorry, Frank." Doc Byrd delivered the news after examining Docella in the clubhouse before the game. The regular right-fielder's face was drawn with pain as he submitted to the proddings.

The threatening clouds held their rain and the game came off. Ferris, with no choice, sent Fireball Andy Garms to the hill and the big Bronco had plenty. The only trouble was Blue Sox right-hand pitching against the right-swinging Broncs was just as good.

In the top of the ninth with a 1-1 tie running the Rooster caught Ferris' eye.

"Lemme take a swing, Skipper." Byrd sitting next the MGR felt the "No!" coming, but before he could censor the act he nudged the pilot. Then Ferris nodded his head and Evans went up there with the wood. The crowd at Blue Sox Bowl gave Evans the works. Derisive cock-a-doodles rose above the catcalls. The confident Sox pitcher had a three-hitter going and this old-timer would be easy.

EVANS took a ball and strike. The rest looked magnificently easy. That third pitch was high and outside to a left-hand batter. The Rooster timed it perfectly, and everybody knew where it was going the minute it left the bat.

"God!" murmured Ferris, half under his breath, watching the ball disappear into the seats in right field. He turned to Byrd, half-smiling. "Have more hunches. Doc. We need 'em." Evans circled the bases slowly, laboriously but with reluctant cheers of the partisan crowd in his ears. Garms closed out the home ninth with only fourteen pitches and a 2-1 Bronc victory in his road uniform hip pocket.

Two days later with Bronco Field again entertaining the Series, the sixth game found the Rooster in right. He'd taken the assignment silently and gone slowly out to his position with something in his eyes more than just elation at the promotion to starting status. Doc Byrd noticed and knew what that something was, but he knew, too, that things would have to work themselves out in their own way without prompting from him.

From the beginning of that sixth game the Broncs were off and running, and the home crowd loved it. So the experts had counted their champs out, eh? By the top of the eighth the Ponies were riding a 10-2 wave. Then as a last gesture before rolling over the Blue Sox strung together three runs, directly traceable to Rooster Evans dawdling after a long hit ball to right-center that went for a base-clearing triple when it should have been a harmless single. Ferris came up off the bench at that, pounding his fist into his palm. Doc Byrd tried to quiet the MGR down, pointing to the substantial lead the Ponies had.

"In a pig's eye! That's no way to play baseball. I oughta slap a fine on that Evans!" But he didn't and the 10-5 win squared the Series.

Byrd made a point of being in the clubhouse several hours before the rest of the squad was due to arrive and suit up for the seventh and final game of the Series. He seated himself off in a corner back of an equipment table and leisurely perused the sports pages. The overwhelming consensus still favored the "better balanced" Blue Sox in this rubber game. Here and there a voice cried "It's just one game and funny things happen—like that last-ditch homer of Rooster Evans', probably the last one in the old gentleman's system—but all the figuring makes things look blue in this finale—Blue Sox, that is." And so on.

THE small sounds of someone quietly entering the dressing room took the trainer's attention from the papers. That someone went to a locker in a shadowed corner of the clubhouse room and began to undress hurriedly, although it still lacked an hour to the time when the others would come trouping in to change street clothes for baseball togs.

Byrd rose and strode forward; his eyes taken with just one thing.

"You shouldn't have been playing on that knee, Son," the Doc said as he walked forward. Rooster Evans pivoted around quickly and his face turned as many colors as the ugly, purplish swollen knee he tried to hide behind a towel.

As Byrd came closer, he saw the look of anger in the younger man's eyes, and then fear.

"Let's see it, Rooster." It was an order, not a request.

Evans stood for a moment as though undecided. Then he spoke. "I didn't expect anybody to be here, not even you. You won't say anything to Ferris until after the game starts?"

Byrd patted the examination table. "Have it your own way. Now hop up."

Evans, under the scrutiny of the other, smiled slightly.

"I thought I could get away with the damn thing but it hasn't been getting any better. Haven't been able to sleep with the darn thing since I hit that wall in the first game." He shook his head and lay back on the rubbing table.

Byrd probed gently with his sensitive fingers. He felt the man wince even at the slightest pressure.

"You've knocked something loose in there, Rooster. You've got a bone chip or a ruptured ligament. You've been crazy to play on that. You'll have to go to the hospital to get that thing fixed."

Rooster swung around off the table and his eyes with the perpetual squint in them squinted even harder. "Look, Doc. You promised you wouldn't tell Ferris until after the game starts. So I'm not much good anymore. Who else is there? I wanta be out there, Doc. After the game, well, then we'll put me in drydock. But this one I've gotta play."

Byrd, knowing determination when he saw it, sighed. "It's your funeral, Rooster. But if you sprint once more on that leg, you're through with big-league baseball, through for good. I've got to tell you the truth."

Byrd methodically put a brace and heavy bandaging on the Rooster's knee.

"You'll keep quiet, Doc?"

"Yes," said Byrd, frowning. But when the other turned away, there was grudging admiration in the trainer's eyes.

BRONCO FIELD stood them in the aisles for the seventh Series clash. The sun was there, too, a warm, friendly early October sun, softening and warming the gentle wind that barely rippled the bright pennants flying high from the stadium's rim.

The reports will tell you that Fireball Andy Garms did some tricks on the mound for Frank Ferris' men, but the Blue Sox had the pitching, too. The two nines ran and hit for four innings, but the runs were for outs and the hits skidded harmlessly along the green carpet of the infield or popped weakly into the air.

In the top of the fifth a Blue Sox got to second with one down. It looked like a break in the pattern when the next batter for Jo-Jo Neill smashed a line single to right and the Sox runner on second put his head down and tore. Almost lazily Rooster Evans in right took the hit on one bounce and fired back a perfect strike to the plate. The Sox runner, past third, saw the throw come in and heard his coach's wild cry of alarm. He headlonged back into third and the Neillmen scoring threat died there.

Fireball Garms was living up to his reputation, but the Blue Sox hurler was standing the Broncs on their heads. One after another the Broncs went up to the plate, only to return after popping or grounding out, if they were lucky enough to get that much off the ball.

"What's he got, Whit?" Byrd asked centerfielder Whittaker curiously.

The Bronco picket man shook his head. "Everything! The guy's hot."

"Come on," yipped Ferris. "Let's get to this guy, gang."

But again it was Blue Sox uniforms that got on base, this time in the top of the seventh. A single, an error and a base on balls filled the sacks with one out. Ferris jiggled the water-cooler handle nervously and gnawed at his fingernails. There were two pitchers warming up in the Bronc bullpen, but it was only token. If he couldn't win with Garms, none of his hurlers could keep him in the game the way Blue Sox pitching was going.

"This is it, Doc," Ferris fumed. "A run or two will win this."

Almost before he finished talking, one of the Neillmen got hold of one and rifled it short to right-center. Byrd, fascinated,

watched the Rooster, off as the ball was hit. As Evans came, the rest of the world stood still. The Sox runner off third, a speedy runner, held close to the bag on the chance the ball might be caught. Either way, with one out, he'd be able to get home. Incredibly, the Rooster got there; he stuck his glove out at shoe-top level and made the catch. He straightened as the Blue Sox baserunner touched up at third and hightailed down the line for the plate. The ball from right came in on one hop and scooted into the big catcher's mitt. The runner arrived at the same time . . . almost! The man in blue thumbed him out and it was an inning saving double-play for the Ponies.

"Hell," roared Ferris, with delight. "I didn't think anybody could make that chuck! Well, we all knew the guy could throw. This was a good time for it, eh, Doc?"

But Byrd was watching the figure in right, coming in slowly as though the sound waves of the wildly cheering crowd were holding him back. And Byrd winced by proxy as the old Rooster neared the dugout to be thumped by his teammates.

IN THE home seventh, Evans nearly broke up the scoreless deadlock himself. His long hit ball sailed grandly out to right, the crowd went mad . . . for a moment, but then it saw the sphere didn't quite have enough carry. The Sox right-fielder stood with his back to the barrier and made the catch.

Evans came back to the bench, his face drawn but trying to smile for the guys who loved him now and said, "Next time, Rooster, ol' kid!"

But Doc Byrd and the Rooster knew there'd not been enough strength in that damaged leg to generate home-run power again.

The eighth was scoreless for both sides. In the top of the ninth, the Sox moved a runner around to third on a single, a sacrifice and an infield out. Fireball Andy put all he had into pitching to the next of Neill's fence busters. A run here in the top of the ninth would look pretty big. The count went full and then the straining Blue Soxer hit a hard drive into the hole between first and second. The Bronc first sacker went deep and knocked the ball down, pounced on it and flipped it over to Andy Garms who tore off the mound and had raced to first to cover. It was a split-second decision and could mean a run, for the Soxer on third had already crossed the plate. Garms took the ball, hit the initial sack just ahead of the flying batter. The two collided and went down.

It was the third out, but Garms' face was white with anger and pain as he came into the dugout.

Ferris and some of the other anxious Ponies stood over him as Byrd felt of the hurler's right shoulder.

The trainer shook his head. "You got a muscle in there that's tightened up on you, Andy. You'll be okay tomorrow . . . but not today."

The big right-hander looked as though he were going to burst into tears but his protestations were half-hearted. He could barely lift his salary wing. Evans slipped down beside the Fireballer.

"Tough luck, Andy," the Rooster said simply. "But maybe we can put this one away for you this inning."

There was no give-up in Manager Ferris, but Byrd noticed the pilot had the look of a man who sees the inevitable staring him in the face as he leaned out of the dugout and wigwagged for his bullpen to redouble their efforts.

Swinging away, Whittaker opened the home ninth by flying deep to center. Burns popped up for the second out but Laney hit a double off left-field concrete, and when the outfielder slipped on the play-in the Bronco third baseman slid into third. Evans was up next, and the Pony crowd stood and cheered as Ferris called the Rooster over to him.

The message was simple. "Powder one, fella," Ferris entreated.

Evans nodded his head, "Do my damndest, Skipper." And the throng, not knowing and hoping for the best, like some intricate strategy, roared even louder as this impromptu conference broke up.

THE Blue Sox flinger, a towering rawboned fellow, sneered openly as his catcher called out: "Here's the cripple. This old man'll be easy. Let 'im hit it, Kid, we can throw this turkey out from center field."

The Sox infield went back deep and shifted over toward right. With two out all they had to worry about was the man at the plate. Laney at third was no sprinter and

the Blue hurler didn't have the motion you could steal home on.

The Rooster missed the first pitch cleanly. The hard swing nearly toppled him over and the Sox catcher chortled.

"Just a man in a wheel chair. The old guy's comin' apart at the stitches. Coupla more chucks we got 'im!"

Evans swung on the next one and got a piece of the ball, fouling it weakly down the right-field line and out of play into the boxes. Even from the bench Byrd could see the pain each swing meant. Ferris noticed it, too, and said something. Doc had kept his promise, so he started to talk then, even as the scene unfolded before them.

The Sox hurler wasted one high and outside and then came back with a bullet fast ball that Evans again weakly blooped foul into extreme right. The Blue infield shifted even more to right. The first baseman was on the foul line and back of the bag, the second sacker was in the hole between first and second, the short stop playing nearly behind second, and the third baseman pulled over into short territory.

It was, of course, as the newspapers pointed out jubilantly afterward, a natural set-up for a ball player who plays with his head as well as his arms and legs.

Before the next pitch, Evans took a foothold, dug in ostentatiously, then waggled his bat momentarily as the hurler wound up. As the ball came in, the Rooster jumped out of his slugger's stance, hopped up forward in the batter's box and met the ball before it broke. The sphere dribbled down the third-base line, well past the startled pitcher. A surprised Laney rocketed off from third as the bunt was laid down, and the amazed crescendo of the crowd testified that he would score easily. The play at first on the slow-moving Evans was all that mattered. With that made, the Sox would get out of here clean, would have the bulge in extra innings with Andy Garms out of there. The third baseman dug over for the ball and the crowd, knowing Evans' slowness, began to groan.

"But look at the Rooster," the throng hollered! He was sprinting, head down, fists beating at the air, wobbling from side to side but going down that line faster than they'd ever seen him. Puffs of white lime came up from the base line as his shoes spatted into the earth, his cap with the big brown B for Broncos came off. Still he came and the scream of the crowd was with him.

THE Blue Sox third baseman got the rolling bunt in a hurry now. He realized he had no man-in-a-wheelchair to throw out here and uncorked the long throw across the diamond with plenty on it. As the white streak bulleted across the infield carpet, Evans gave a last desperate lunge. He hit the sack, a stumbling, careening split second ahead of the thud that announced the arrival of the ball in the stretching first baseman's glove. The umpire spread his hands palms downward, and the first of the hysterical crowd stormed over onto the field even as Evans staggered and fell, his leg crumpling. The Broncs had won, and the man of the hour was Rooster Evans, there safe on first. But the Rooster was not getting up.

Doc Byrd was the first to reach the prostrate Bronco. He took in the white sweating face and grimace of pain at a glance and signalled for a stretcher. Several park policemen formed a cordon and the procession wound its way through screaming fans to the sanctity of the clubhouse, with all outsiders barred.

Ferris plucked at Byrd's sleeve as they went inside.

"His leg gone, Doc?"

Byrd nodded his head, murmured, "He'll never play baseball again, Frank."

Ferris did not look the part of the victorious manager of an underdog Series club. He gnawed at his lip. "And to think I rode the guy. Guy like that, plays with his heart even when his legs are gone. Makin' up impromptu plays. Hell, Doc, he won that series for us, the Rooster did." And then as though words on the subject made him feel worse, Ferris wheeled abruptly and left the dressing room where they'd laid the Rooster on a rubbing table.

Byrd was with him, and when Evans could open his jaw from gritting it and talk through the pain he managed a grin at the ring of solicitous teammates clustered around him, "Don't look so bad, fellows. We *won* the darn thing, didn't we!"

The other Broncos shuffled uneasily. Byrd knew what they were thinking. It was the same fear that stabs at the hearts of all men who work with eyes or hands or legs,

whether they be artists, pianists, or ball-players. That moment when the organ or member that is livelihood to them falls useless. It is a kind of death and the Rooster saw it in the faces around him, the faces that tried to smile and look cheerful. And Evans closed his eyes, suddenly lusterless, that knew somehow that they had squinted into the brilliance of the sunfield for the last time as a player.

SO IT was that he didn't hear Frank Ferris and President Seith come into the dressing room. The other Broncs made way for them, and finally Ferris and Seith stood beside the injured player. The knee was exposed now. It looked as though a truck had gone over it, with discoloration and swelling.

Ferris cleared his throat, and Evans opened his eyes. "Hello, Skipper," and he tried to smile.

The MGR frowned down at the outfielder. "Rooster, ordinarily I don't like my men making up their own plays on the field. I don't recall ordering you to lay down a bunt. Oughta dock you for it.

"Still, I'm in a difficult position. You see, I'm no longer in a position to fine you. President Seith has moved me upstairs to head the Broncs' farm system as general manager. Now you might think that leaves the Ponies without a manager. But it doesn't."

Ferris reached for Evans' hand and squeezed it. "Funny, but President Seith and I thought of the same guy for my job. You're it, Rooster."

President Seith, nodding, mopped his forehead and looked mightily pleased. "Yes, you're the man, Rooster, and my heartiest congratulations." He took the other Evans hand in his own hamlike paw.

With both hands imprisoned, the Rooster had to do it with his eyes. He squinted them to see through the mist; somehow managed a gruff, "Thank you."

Then his teammates took over.

The newspapermen, waiting outside, heard the tremendous whoop that went up. And they wondered if the game was still being played in the Broncos dressing room. For it sounded like a good man had just scored a mighty important run.

All in the next issue

"Trail of the Burma Star"

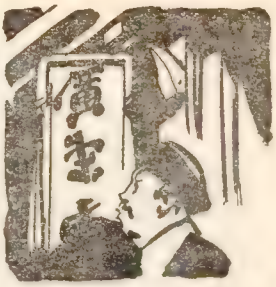
STEUART EMERY

IF YOU were a young lady in a New York apartment and wanted to hide one of the world's costliest jewels, where would you put it? Of one thing you could be sure, a lot of people would try to outguess you. . . . . .

WILBUR S. PEACOCK

Old customs are good—up to a point.
New customs are good—up to a point.
The point is where is the point?

"The Two Worlds of Ling Pao"



●

TOO MANY people had decided he'd never make good, that too much wealth had spoiled him. So, though he landed on the most desolate island of the East, and saw the most forlorn plantation, the young man had to find the way to success.

"The Surangani Affair"

HUGH P. CAVE

●

of SHORT STORIES

And of course

"The Shooter's Corner"

●

E. HOFFMANN PRICE

"A Gunman's Gall"

●

CADDO CAMERON

JAMES B. HENDRYX

F. R. PIERCE

As District Patrol Officer off the New Guinea Coast, Allan Was Disconcerted to Find the Girl Had Stowed Away on the Official Launch

MONSOON

By CHARLES YERKOW

SEATED in the wicker chair, and now realizing that the two-day trek up the New Guinea coast to catch up with the fugitive was wearing him down, Allan Foraton looked out the screen door across the rain-drenched clearing and vaguely wondered if his mission would succeed. Opposite the veranda of the Resident Magistrate's house the Papuan Constabulary barracks huddled in the tropical September torrent, the Kokidi village now in oozing deep mud, the jungle hushed

and the only sound the incessant thrashing rain.

Foraton looked straight ahead at the lonely path that went past the storage sheds to the boat landing, where, visible above the lush foliage and palms, the tall schooner masts swayed under the scuddy-clouded sky. And Bartley had already been here—and had gone up the track to the next coastal village. If the natives ran Bartley across the bay to Leki Island, he could then get some wily pearler to run him over to Australia.

"You'll let me use your launch?" Foraton asked. "I think I can still catch up with Bartley."

Harris, the Resident Magistrate of Kokidi, changed the position of some papers on his desk. "Seems I can't talk you out of it," he said slowly. "Look at yourself. You haven't enough strength left to keep awake, but you're too damned stubborn to admit it."

"I'll be all right."

"At least take along one of my men, Allan."

Foraton shook his head. "I'll be all right," he repeated. "As District Patrol Officer, I probably shouldn't say that Bartley is a personal matter with me." He paused, turned in his chair to face Harris. "Do you know if Bartley went up to see Margaret Stewart?" he asked quietly.

The Resident Magistrate sighed heavily. "Margaret still means a great deal to you. All right, Allan. Bartley was seen at the Stewart Shippers place, so I imagine he saw Margaret. Probably told her a tall story about being accused of something he didn't do. He was then seen going up the track. The rain had let up, and we thought he was on his way to the Stewart plantation. That's all I can tell you."

Foraton ran his palm over his tired eyes. He'd not try to convince Margaret that Bartley was not the kind of man she thought he was. Like Old Man Stewart, she was quick of temper, proud. She'd never admit it, though. It was one worry less to know that her cutter was laid up for repairs, or else she'd have herself run Bartley across the strait to Australia.

Harris said, "Better come to my place and get some rest. Forget about Bartley—we'll get him in due time. And for heaven's sake, Allan, forget Margaret." He slapped the desk top. "Wish Old Man Stewart would take her back to Darwin next trip!"

The young District Patrol Officer's mouth twitched slightly. In the past four months Margaret Stewart had changed. But the change was spite, that much he was sure of, and it hurt him to think about it. He got up suddenly and reached for his rain gear. "I'm taking your launch," he said curtly.

"No use trying to stop you, I guess. What about a revolver?"

Foraton slapped the bulging Webley under his slicker.

"You'll be stuck on Leki," Harris warned him, "with the rains and your prisoner, if you happen to catch up with him."

Foraton did not answer as he stepped out on the veranda. He started trudging through the downpour and the mud toward the landing.

TORRENTS of rain beat down on the green-gray swells as the launch chugged past the anchored trader schooners and then skirted the reef wall for the open sea. The awning could not protect most of the boat, so that rain swirled from the bow to the stern; the old tarpaulin was soaked with rain and sea spray; the engine housing was letting wisps of smoke out, grinding miserably; and the tiller tugged in Foraton's grip as the seas rushed the launch. Bracing his legs against the floorboards and squinting under the rim of his pith helmet, Foraton set his course for Leki Island.

He thought of Margaret Stewart. He had been unable to convince her that the charges against Bartley had not been brought by himself but by the mate and the crew of the schooner. Cort Cramm and his partner Bartley had been returning from Daru when they ran into a *guba* blow. The mate said Bartley was at the wheel at the time, and the mate said he came on deck just in time to see a man go over the side. Then Bartley refused to put about—said it couldn't be done in safety. They lost the man, and the man was Cort Cramm. Now Bartley was the sole owner of the pearling schooner, whatever pearls were on board, everything. Such happenings weren't unusual in the islands. The Mereka Resident Magistrate wanted to question Bartley, and that was when Bartley

decided to run out. Margaret, of course, refused to believe Bartley was guilty of the charges.

Foraton couldn't convince her that the mate and the crew brought those charges. He couldn't convince her in Mereka, and he had not wanted to try it back there in Kokidi.

"You're just trying to show your authority," Margaret had stormed at him. "You never did like Bill!"

The launch shuddered sickeningly and fought through a wave. Foraton braced himself for the slide into the deep trough. His eyes were on the bow, and it was then he saw, under the forward seat, the spare tarpaulin lift up. The huddled form was Margaret Stewart. Her raincoat was tight against her slim body, her soaked blue denims showing above low-heeled shoes. She struggled up, pushing with her legs against the engine housing, and seated herself on the forward seat.

Momentarily, Foraton relaxed his grip on the tugging tiller, then checked himself in his instinctive move to step forward and help the girl.

"You've done a foolish thing!" he shouted.

Without looking at him, Margaret sat there, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her taut face and big eyes turned to the floorboards. The spray hit her blonde hair under the wide-brimmed rain cap. Rain and the sea slapped into the boat.

"Put that canvas around you!" Foraton shouted again, pointing at the spare tarpaulin.

Margaret didn't move.

Her defiance irritated him. She was still stubborn about the whole Bartley incident —she had hid in the launch, and now would try to plead with him to leave Bill Bartley alone, to let him escape to Australia.

Foraton felt unsure of himself. Alone he'd have gone on to Leki, but with Margaret on board, and the rain and sea whipping up worse, he wasn't sure he wanted to risk it.

He stood up and scanned the haze on the horizon. The downpour obliterated whatever palm tops or land might have been visible. The sea ran heavy. Margaret looked pale, worn out. Was this a ruse, on her part, he asked himself; an attempt to get him to feel sorry for her, and so abandon the run to Leki? He wanted to make the arrest, but he didn't want any harm to come to Margaret.

He glimpsed the dark mass rising out of the haze off starboard. Pulling hard on the tiller, he sent the launch dangerously into a cross sea and fought to head her toward the reefs. He knew that this strip of land was uninhabited; he tried to remember the charts—the exact entrance through the reef wall.

As the launch rolled through the heaving swells, Foraton fought the tiller and at the same time let his mind wander back four months—to the time he had asked Margaret Stewart to marry him. He had just got his assignment as District Patrol Officer out of Mereka, and he had felt things would work out for both of them. But Margaret had wanted him behind a desk, in her father's firm, where the offices never saw the native Constabulary and where a clean glass pitcher of cool water reposed by each desk.

"Wouldn't it be better," she had said, "than running up and down the coast chasing natives and drunken sailors?" He had refused that office job and had accepted the District Patrol Officership; a little thing, but enough to make Margaret furious, and—and to suddenly cause her to take an active interest in Bill Bentley, her father's manager.

Bartley, the opportunist, who held one job while he invested in a partnership wherever he could, usually at no risk to himself. Cort Cramm had skippered their pearling schooner, but now Cort was dead. If Bartley was innocent of that *guba* blow incident, why didn't he simply go before the Resident Magistrate?

Foraton kept his eyes open, watched for the reefs ahead. The boiling, swirling white foam caused his tired mind to see the visions of a spoiled woman—Margaret. Old Man Stewart's only daughter. She was making a fool of herself over Bill Bartley. She was too stubborn and too proud to admit it, and Foraton knew his own weakness—he was still in love with her.

He stole an occasional glance at the huddled girl. She had stowed away on the launch for the sole purpose of pleading with him to let Bartley escape, and now she was

too proud to go through with it. Stubborn little fool! She'll sit there now and not say a word.

The rain lashed at his bronzed face. He put the tiller over when the roar of waves over reefs crashed on his brain. The splash of tepid water momentarily awakened him. But he was too late. The launch rose high. For a moment it looked as if he had got her through the entrance—then she fell, with the hard, smashing sound of the propeller cracking against the reefs. The bow went down.

Cursing under his breath, Foraton cut the switch. The launch, her propeller gone, drifted helplessly, stern first, in the quieter sea of the lagoon.

A small smile curving her lips, Margaret caught the significance of the situation. Foraton looked away from her. This meant Bartley would have time to reach Leki and get one of the unsuspecting pearlers to run him across the strait to Australia. It would be days before the Resident Magistrate sent someone from Kokidi to look for the launch.

The wind drove them toward the drenched foliage of the high bank. The keel of the launch was still in deep water when the stern hit; the deep water, Foraton knew, would be to their advantage when the tide set out. He jumped ashore and made the line fast to a bush root, then got back into the boat and sat under the awning.

"It looks like we'll have a long wait," he said dourly.

Margaret didn't reply.

Foraton wondered if he showed his anger. Not that he cared what impression he was making now on Margaret; he had had no intentions of putting back to Kokidi. He didn't know how, but he wanted to catch up with Bartley at Leki Island and bring him back to Mereka to answer the charges before the Resident Magistrate. And here he was sitting, helpless, with a broken propeller—and with Margaret.

The slate-black sky looked as if it would never again clear. The girl sat in sullen silence, her back turned to the wind, her eyes on the sloshing water under the floorboards.

When the sky brightened to a pale gray, she glanced up. Foraton smiled, said, "They'll come looking for us, in a couple of days."

She clearly did not welcome his concern over her welfare. "You'll never catch up with Bill now," was all that she said.

He shrugged. "Not with a broken propeller shaft," he admitted. Margaret was still thinking about Bartley. He looked at her for a long time. "Margaret," he said, "won't you believe me that Bill isn't the sort of man that you imagine? Can't you honestly—"

The girl's eyes clouded. "Don't talk to me."

Foraton wanted to talk to her, to tell her about Bartley, about that partnership with Cort Cramm, and the possibility that Bartley pushed Cort overboard, but then he did no more than sigh and glance down the shore line. "Some day," he said, "you'll find out I was right."

"And then," she added, "I suppose it'll be too late. Is that it?" She gave him a short laugh. "Your concern touches me, Allan."

His face flushed, and he knew he had to walk off his anger. Without a word, he went to the stern and jumped to the bank, then made his way through the drenched foliage along the shore. The land sloped down to a sandy beach, and, unmindful of the rain, he went on, in muddled thought, in anger, reproaching himself for being such a fool. Margaret didn't want him, that much was clear now.

He wondered if she would take the spare tarpaulin and use it for a cover. Then another thought raced through his tired mind—that she might get the crazy idea to shove the launch off and leave him stranded. She'd do it—but not with a broken propeller. And it was impossible to rig the tarpaulin for a sail without a mast and gaff. He blamed his sudden alarm on his own tired brain.

The brisk walk in the rain was helping clear his thoughts. He paced the hard-packed sand, his eyes roaming over the lonely beach. How long before the R. M. sent one of the schooners out looking? Maybe two days. Then Allan's gaze fell on the up-ended outrigger some hundred yards down the beach. No one was in sight. The roar of the sea on the reefs shattered the monotonous drone of the rain. He started toward the outrigger, telling himself

that some natives must have been blown off their course, and that they made it safe into the lagoon here.

He was still twenty yards from the outrigger when he noticed the makeshift lean-to of cocoanut leaves. He came to a halt and looked more closely at the beached boat. Her bottom was smashed. And now that lean-to seemed out of place—it was hardly enough cover for a native crew.

Foraton edged back to the foliage. He waited a moment, and then cautiously advanced. He couldn't help thinking of Bartley—that perhaps he had been wrecked here in his attempt to run to Leki.

He saw a frizzle-haired Nuku man straighten into view. The big lips of the native moved as he said something to a companion under the shelter. Foraton unbuckled the slicker and pulled out the Webley; he wasn't in the least surprised when he came face to face with Bartley.

The man's face was unshaven; the two-day trek up the coast track left its strained mark on him. He was one of those who always refused to wear rain gear during the wet season, and his white coat clung soakingly to him. His eyes shifted wildly and an oath growled under his breath. He said something to the big native.

Foraton read their attitude correctly. The Nuku now knew that he, Foraton, was here to punish them, and that there would be plenty tobacco sticks for the native if, somehow, they ran out on the District Patrol Officer, or—got rid of him.

"You're under arrest," Foraton said. He looked at the native, asked, "You savvy white man talk?"

Sullenly, the native glared back that he understood what was being said. "Me fella savvy," he answered in island pidgin English.

"What name?"

"Nagama."

Foraton moved the revolver in a short arc. "I'll warn both of you," he said evenly, "not to try anything. If you do I'll put a bullet in you." He ordered Bartley to turn his back, then stepped up to him and pulled the automatic out of the hip pocket and tossed it into the sea.

He gave a brief explanation about the broken propeller and said they'd need the beams off the outrigger to rig the tarpaulin for a sail on the launch. He put Bartley and Nagama to stripping the smashed boat.

SURPRISE and frustration showed in Margaret's eyes when the prisoners came marching up the bank. The meeting between her and Bartley was awkward, strained; she rose, her eyes flashing anger at Foraton, then she slowly took her seat again—without saying a word to Bartley.

"We'll set a mast," Foraton said. He ordered the native into the launch, then had Bartley hand the beams over the gunwale.

There was a lull in the rain. Foration squinted at the sky, but there was no break in the black clouds.

The big native worked in silence, his eyes shifting from Bartley to the high bank. Foraton knew he'd have to watch his own step now—he kept his distance from Bartley, held the revolver ready, and kept both men working.

It started raining again, then toward mid-afternoon another lull came. Birds flapped into the air for a brief spell and wheeled in wide, lazy sweeps over the beach and the lagoon.

The work dragged. When some lashings had to be cut, Nagama asked Foraton for the launch hatchet. Foraton ordered him to the bank and himself got into the boat to do the cutting. Thereafter he kept the hatchet hooked in the pocket of his own slicker. Bartley grinned, as if to say that they still had a long way before reaching Kokidi, that he might still escape.

Foraton's mind toyed with the schooner incident. Before pushing his partner Cort over the rail, Bartley would first make sure he had the partnership papers to the pearling rights. Instinctively, Foraton glanced at the breast bulge of Bartley's soaked coat. Folded papers would bulge like that—

Foraton didn't rush blindly at his chance. He didn't want to slip up; he played it calmly—to make sure. He told Bartley and Nagama to take a rest, and tossed each one a cigarette. Bartley reached for his automatic lighter in his inside pocket, then paused. One glance told Foraton that the papers were the familiar legal ones, folded three times, and that they would surely suffice to open Margaret's eyes to the truth. Bartley fumbled with the lighter, blew smoke as he held the flame for the native,

then glared at the District Patrol Officer. Margaret was by herself under the awning. Foraton sat opposite her but somewhow couldn't bring himself to talk. He got up and went toward the stern. He sensed that something was wrong. Was he imagining this? He ran his palm over his eyes, looked closely at the Webley in his right hand. The gun was beginning to weigh too much. But there was something else—

"Where's Bartley?" he shouted to Nagama.

The native looked up at him in silent surprise.

Bartley was emerging from the foliage, his cupped hands rubbing together a blackish ash.

Foraton cursed himself for a fool! He had revealed his purpose to Bartley, and now the one proof was burned!

THE rain and the wind came in gusts. Nagama and Bartley worked slowly. Foraton knew they were prolonging the work, trying to drag it into the night, when they might attempt to take the launch. Out at sea no schooner sail was visible.

With the night approaching, Foraton began to feel the pressure of needed sleep. His temples throbbed, his eyes burned. He stood on the bank while Bartley and Nagama lifted the mast into place and lashed it down. He could not risk leaving the lagoon at night—he would have to wait for morning.

Margaret was hoping something would happen—Foraton sensed that by watching her move about restlessly. She kept her eyes on Bartley—as if waiting for Bartley to attack.

In the last faint light of dusk, Foraton ordered Bartley to sit on the floorboards, then had Nagama tie him down—arms over the thwart, securely bound to the ankles. Then he bound the native's wrists and legs the same way. Margaret watched silently, and when he was finished she turned her back to him.

He poured water into the tin cup and passed it to her, but she shook her head. He gave the water to Bartley, then poured another cupful for Nagama. Then he sat down in the stern and looked seaward again. The sea was dark, without a bobbing light to give him hope. Later, he made sure the line ashore to the bush root was free for the tide.

The jungle night sounds started up, high-pitched, nerve-racking, incessant. The rain poured for a while, stopped. The wind died down. It started to rain again.

He didn't dare fall asleep. He sat his weary watch, often startled awake by some sound from the jungle or the sudden pitch of the launch. He held the revolver leveled at the blackness before him, and now and again felt the hatchet under his feet. Once he even thought that Margaret would try to take the gun from him and give it to Bartley. She was impulsive, proud, and she was angry.

He went forward, feeling his way along the engine housing, and ran his hands over the cords of his prisoners, then returned to his seat and the long wait began all over again.

He fought to keep awake. Fought to hear the real sounds of the rain and not the imaginary ones in his tired brain. He was hearing Bartley approaching. Nagama had the hatchet, and Foraton heard the whir of it as it slashed at his head. He jumped up. The night was as black as before, and there was no movement in the boat. The rain was a steady drone. His back ached and his eyes fought to close. When the pouring sound of the rain suddenly stopped, he came awake again.

With the first faint brightening of the sky, the rain started with a drizzle and became a torrent. The drumming, the beating of it on awning and boat lulled his brain into a stupor. He felt more tired now than he had been through the night. Nagama was fully awake, staring stupidly at him. Bartley was just coming awake. Margaret was sleeping.

When the rain eased, Foraton awoke the girl and ordered her to the stern. Then he untied the bonds of both prisoners, one at a time, and seated them in the bow. He stuck the Webley into the holster under his unbuckled slicker, then lashed the tarpaulin to the short outrigger beam.

He called to Nagama to take down the awning. That done, the native went forward, and Foraton brought the halyard aft and turned it around the tiller post. Then they sat in silence and waited for the breeze to freshen.

By mid-morning there was a slight breeze from the east. The launch wouldn't sail into the wind, and Foraton didn't try it. He sat hunched, his burning eyes keeping the two men in the bow in clear vision. When he looked seaward, the projecting reefs blurred before his eyes. He couldn't sail against the wind back to Kokidi, but, if he could keep awake, he could reach Leki Island—and he could get a police boy there to stand guard over the prisoners.

THE breeze was too slight for the heavy launch. He watched the birds wheeling lazily in the still air overhead. The silence seemed to roar in his brain. His eyes felt hot, his lids heavy. When he looked at Margaret, she returned a defiant stare at him—she was saying: "You'll never get Bill back to Kokidi, and I'm glad." He shook his head—no, she hadn't said anything, it was all the play of his imagination.

He knew he couldn't hold out much longer. And the day was only starting. If Margaret were on his side, he might get her to stand guard with the gun. He knew she was capable, but he also knew his thoughts were in vain. If he asked her for help, she would only laugh at him. There was no way to convince her that Bartley was guilty of the charges—that Bartley would resort to anything to get free.

The irony of the situation caused Foraton to smile wryly. A District Patrol Officer, with two prisoners and a disabled launch, with a girl who hated him, here on the reef island off the mainland, with sleep closing in on him, with no chance to bring his prisoners in. His brow knotted. He was feeling sorry for himself, he thought crossly; he'd do better to keep on the move, to keep awake. He ordered Bartley tied down again, then he tied up the native. Without a word, he jumped to the bank and searched out a long bark, lashed this to one of the short paddles taken from the outrigger. The improvised oar reached deep over the stern of the launch. Then he shoved off, and by slow sculling, barely drifting in the mirror-like opalescent lagoon, headed the boat out toward the reefs. He knew there was wind over the open sea. He was only a short distance from the entrance when the bark slipped off the paddle.

"You ought to give up," Margaret said coldly. "You don't really expect to make it this way to Kokidi, do you?"

The launch swung lazily, her side to the reefs. Now a stronger breeze ruffled the lagoon. Foraton hoisted the sail and put the tiller over, but even so it took a full hour before he got the launch around the lagoon and up to the gap in the reef wall. When he at last steered into the open sea he pointed the bow to the west, toward the pearling islands.

But Foraton wasn't blind to the conditions. He saw the quick exchange of words between Bartley and Nagama, even if Margaret didn't. He knew what they were planning. Yet, he couldn't leave them tied, not when he expected a whip-up in the wind at any moment. If the launch capset, he wanted his prisoners to have a chance.

He told Margaret to untie their bonds.

"We ought to make the first island late in the afternoon," he said. He watched her loosen Bartley's cords; she whispered something close to the man's cheek, touched his hand. Foraton felt the emptiness inside him tighten at his throat; he didn't know whether it was anger or pity.

Margaret returned to her seat.

FORATON looked up when he heard the hoarse voice of Bartley talking to the native. Nagama seemed frightened. Foraton watched the two men, and then realized that Bartley had put one terrific, deciding thought into the native's head. It was so simple: when sleep overcame the District Patrol Officer, Nagama was to rush him and push him overboard. Then they would have the launch for a free run to North Australia, and no one to punish them.

Foraton shifted around, fingered the Webley, and then began tapping his heel against the floorboards and counting the rhythmic beat. He continued the tapping and the counting, and for a time it kept his mind clear. He wondered how long he could last.

The wind freshened, and the bow of the launch renewed her slow push through the rolling swells. Two brown boobies flew low over the boat.

Foraton remembered he was to keep tapping his heel. He also remembered the revolver in his hand. How long had he been in this stupor, he asked himself. He glanced

at the bow. Nagama was seated on the forward end of the engine housing, and Bartley was instigating the big native, urging him to rush in and take the gun.

Shaking his head to clear it, Foraton asked himself if this was the play of his imagination. In the same instant he had a flash dream of Margaret beating her hands against the scowling native. That was all it was—a dream.

But the danger ahead of him was very real. The Nuku man appeared to be too near, and so did Bartley. Foraton knew he couldn't shout to Margaret—she'd only jeer him. He heard her jeering him, heard her in the swimming dullness that pounded inside his head.

He leveled the revolver, held it before him. He thought he saw Margaret move away on the seat beside him— He had no intentions of shooting. He only wanted to scare Nagama.

He saw the native back away from the engine housing. Then he heard Bartley coaxing the native—

Finding it impossible to keep his head clear of that dullness and the weight pressing his eyes closed, Foraton tried to stand up. He sank back, cursed. Instead of the launch gunwale, he saw a mob of men fighting in a village street; he saw beachcombers and mates, deckhands and stokers along the Kokidi track rushing toward the hills where the gold fields boasted rich finds. He saw the report on the murder of Rossell, the District Patrol Officer of the interior. That incident had decided him, Foraton, to join the Service—to try and bring law to the wild New Guinea interiors and coastal districts. He got Mereka—and with it he got this pay-off!

The improvised sail gave a sharp *plop* as a gust of wind hit it. Foraton straightened, came out of his sleepy stupor. He heard Bartley urging Nagama; he saw Margaret pressing herself away, leaning almost over the gunwale.

The roll of the launch again lulled his brain. He knew he was closing his eyes. Now something thumped, something hard, like shoes over floorboards.

He saw Bartley rushing him. The leering face was close, the broad shoulders cut off the view of the bow and the low-hanging sail. Foraton leveled the Webley and fired.

At first he thought the shot would awaken him and keep him awake, but all that happened was a more intense fire in his tired brain rebelling against the sharpness and closeness of the explosion. Then silence fell, only the softer sound of the bow pushing through the heavy swells, and the irritating ruffle of the improvised sail.

Foraton wondered if he had hit Bartley. Someone was moving before him, and then strong hands grabbed his wrists. He felt the gun wrenched out of his grip. He closed his eyes, waited for the coolness of the sea to bring him back to his senses—for he knew Bartley would now toss him over the side.

The launch rolled lazily, and someone was pushing him off the seat—

WHEN Foraton opened his eyes his first thought was for the revolver and his prisoners. He knew he had fallen asleep, but everything else was a hazy dream, unclear, unreal.

It was dusk. The wind was strong, and the bow was slapping hard against the choppy sea. There was no rain. He had no idea in which direction the launch was heading.

In the bow, Bartley and the sullen native glared back at him. Bartley was holding a strip of blood-soaked cloth over his leg.

Foraton turned his head to face Margaret at the tiller. The girl was silent, as before, but in her hand a cocked Webley looked menacing, and she held it in true aim toward the prisoners.

Foraton told himself she'd do well not to ask questions. He said, "I'll take the tiller, Margaret."

She let go the tiller and he heard a sigh of relief escape her. Then she handed him the revolver. "I saw an island over there," she said quietly and pointed off starboard.

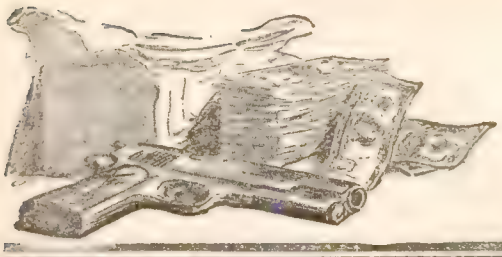
He put the tiller hard over, said nothing.

"I heard Bill tell Nagama to—"

"I know," Foraton said. He knew she wouldn't want him to talk too much about what had happened. He felt the change in her attitude toward him, and there was warmth in her husky voice. "Thank you, Margaret," was all he said.

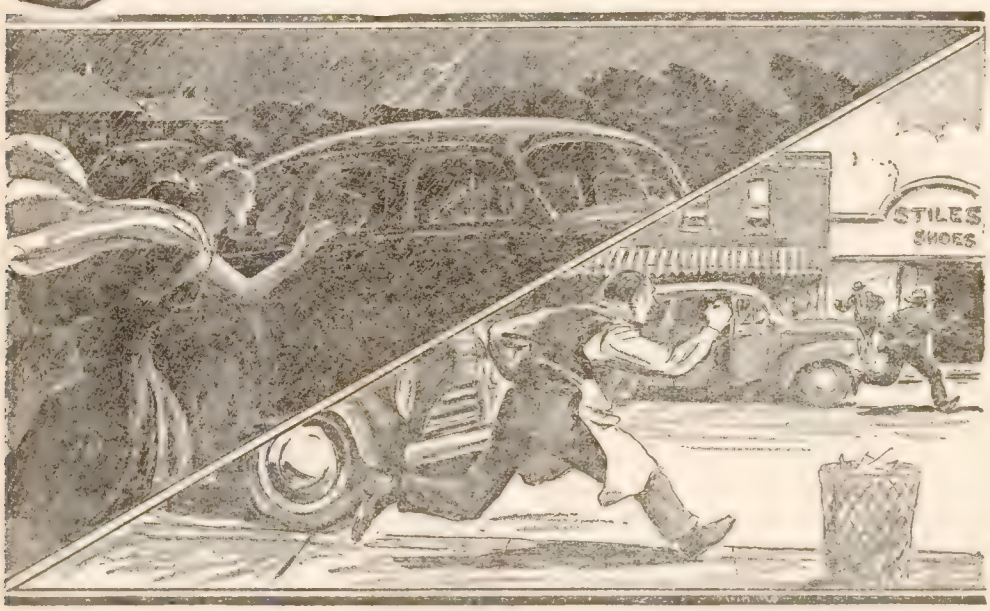
The dusk held a pale yellow brightness—a sign that the storm was mostly spent.

PERILOUS ESCORT



By

HELEN REILLY



TONI THORNE'S first encounter with Clark Whitney was not propitious.

It took place in the Sea View Club in Eastfield, Connecticut, on the night of August the 21st. Noise, laughter, voices, music, a few couples drifting lazily round the oval floor; the evening was hot, airless. Toni was at one of the tables with the Pat Blackwells, friends of hers who had just returned from a trip through the Canadian Rockies. She didn't intend to stay long. She had come to the Club to tell them her news and say goodbye.

"I'm going to be married," she said as soon as she sat down. "I'm leaving Eastfield tomorrow morning early, and I wanted you two to know before I went."

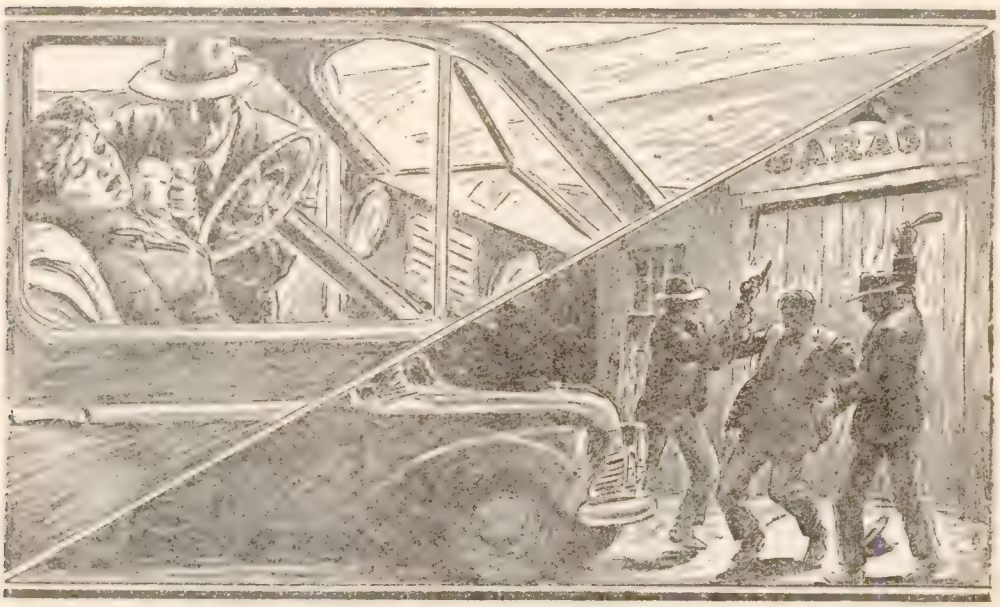
The Blackwells were surprised and pleased. Pat said, "Well, I'll be damned. Somebody finally got you to tear yourself away from that job." Pat's wife, Anita, exclaimed, "Toni—I'm so *glad*. Who is it?"

Toni said, "William Grant," and there was a small pause. Anita broke it. She said, "Oh," flatly. Pat said too heartily, "Well, well—Grant. We met him at your house in the spring, didn't we? Friend of your brother's, big fellow, brown hair and glasses. Manufactured something."

Toni nodded. "That's right, textiles." She was amused at Pat's and Anita's reaction, not resentful. She was extremely fond of both of them; she didn't care particularly for some of their friends, or their way of life, dashing hither and yon on practically unlimited money in planes or in fast cars. William, quiet, steady, dependable—and fun, was outside their ken. In their eyes he would be dull—until they knew him better.

She was answering their questions about

It Had Seemed a Routine Trip South, but Too Many Incidents and Accidents Kept Happening. What Lay Back of It All?



him and about her immediate plans when she became aware that somone was staring at her. She looked up and around. It was a man at a neighboring table. The man was tall, with a rather good-looking, rugged face, and a thick cap of fair hair that contrasted strikingly with his deeply tanned skin. He was alone. His eyes were fastened on her. There was a singularly penetrating quality to them. The steadiness of his gaze was almost impertinent. It annoyed her. She felt her color rising, looked away.

When she looked back a few minutes later, he wasn't at his table, he was out on the dance floor, waltzing with a girl in pink. Toni asked Anita about him. "Who is he, do you know?" Anita twisted sideways. "The man with the blond hair? His name is Whitney, I think—yes, Clark Whitney. Earl Bishop introduced him to us at the tennis matches this morning. He's staying at the Inn. He's only been round here a couple of weeks. Attractive, isn't he? Why do you want to know? Interested?"

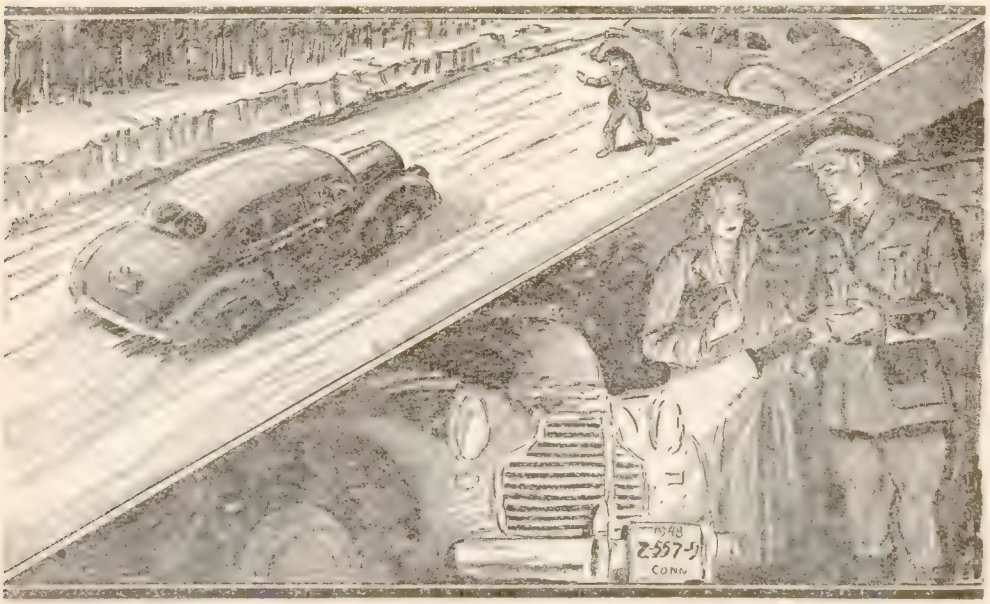
Toni laughed. "Don't be silly, I just wondered." People began coming up to the table then, and she danced with Pat and Box Raleigh and Jim Spence and forgot about the man named Clark Whitney—until later on. The Club was crowded that night, everyone was there. The presence of Grace Ordin caused a small sensation. Grace lived on the shore in Fairburn, next to the Endicotts, whose son, a child of five, had been kidnaped ten days earlier. Pat went and spoke to Grace. But there was no news. The little boy was still missing. It was a distressing topic. People shied away from it. The band seemed to increase its tempo, voices were louder, laughter more frequent. Out on the horizon thunder began to growl.

Toni was suddenly tired. She said good night to Pat and Anita, promised to write to them, and slipped quietly from the crowded room.

IT WAS on her way out of the Club that she had her encounter with the blond-haired Mr. Whitney. The Sea View was an informal sort of place. There was no cloak room. People left their hats and coats piled haphazardly in the hall, or on chairs and sofas in the rooms to the right and left of the front door. Toni had thrown her cape over a chair in the room to the right. The door was usually open. When she came to it that night, it was closed. She pushed it inward, on darkness.

Someone had turned the lamps off. But light from the hall, streamed past her, vaguely illuminating the figure of a man standing at one of the windows, leaning forward and looking out. As she opened the door wider, the man whirled. "Shut that—" His tone was sharp. He bit the command off short. The man was Mr. Clark Whitney.

Toni reached for the switch and gave it a shove. Bulbs in the ceiling flashed on. She looked at Clark Whitney. The concentration with which he had been staring through the black panes was gone. His pose was indolent, hands in his pockets, head at a lazy angle. Toni said coldly, "Sorry to incommode you," ignored his suave, "You didn't, it's quite all right," and got her cape. Walking out with it, throwing it around her shoulders, she recorded half consciously that whatever Mr. Clark Whitney had been doing at the window he had moved out of sight when she had switched on the light.



The front door resisted her tug. She had to give it a hard pull to get it open. It slammed loudly behind her. The wind had risen. Outside it was very dark and rain was falling. Before she got to the end of the terrace it was coming down in torrents. Her face and hair were drenched in an instant. Flying along the path between barberry bushes, Toni had to lean against the wind. In the big, graveled enclosure below, she dashed wetness out of her eyes and fought her way to her car. It was hard to find in the blackness. Lightning flashed and she saw it. She went round a Buick, past a Cadillac with a man and a woman in it, and got into the Chevrolet fast.

Toni hated lightning. She didn't lose any time, shot out of the Club grounds by the back entrance and tore down the road at top speed. The house that had been her father's and mother's, and in which she had lived with her brother Frank until he went west, was less than a mile away. Lightning

ripped the sky viciously and thunder exploded crashingly overhead as Toni ran the car into the garage. She closed the big doors with a sigh of thanksgiving at being in out of the storm.

It might have been thunder, it might have been the Club and Mr. Clark Whitney, whose ambiguous image refused to fade, it might have been the fact that she was alone in the silent rooms, but Toni was nervous that evening. She was particularly careful with locks and bolts. It would be the last time, she thought, making rounds. Tomorrow night she would be well on her way south. Every inch of the long, low, rambling house had been swept and garnished by Mrs. Eddy, her cleaning woman, and she herself was already packed, so that there was very little for her to do. It was late when she finished the windows and doors, almost a quarter of twelve, and if she was going to leave at five the next morning she ought to go to bed at once.

But she was restless, didn't feel like sleep. Saying goodbye to things was always difficult. She had lived in this house since she was a child, had come back to it from school and then from college. After her father's and then her mother's death, she had shared it with Frank and later with Frank and his wife. Every square foot of the three acres, the lawns, the apple orchard, the gardens, was as familiar to her as the palm of her hand. Now she was pulling up stakes. She was going to a new environment that would be hers and William's. What was it going to be like?

She threw a cigarette she had just lighted into the clean fireplace, retrieved it, and crushed it out in an ash tray. She had made up her mind. It wasn't a question of money,

she had enough of that, and her job was interesting as jobs went, but there was more to living than that. William could give her what she wanted, a home, a union of purpose, stability, children. The trouble was, she thought, turning out the lights in the living room and dining room she had waited too long to make a decision. She had known William for years, had liked him from the first moment they met. She should have married him last winter. But Frank was in the middle of a financial jam then, and needed her.

Upstairs in the big bedroom at the front of the house, her bags, with the exception of a small dressing case, were ready and strapped. She had sent her wardrobe trunk by express the day before. She hadn't bought many new things, the wedding was going to be small and quiet. William's mother was an invalid, which was why she was going to be married in Charlottestown, Georgia, instead of here in Eastfield. William had

asked her, diffidently, whether she minded, and she had said no. With Frank gone there was no one else she wanted with her.

Pack the dressing case in the morning, she thought. The rain was still coming down hard. She fell asleep to the soft, soporific drumming on the roof of the sun porch as she had fallen asleep so often before. When the shrilling of the alarm on the table beside the bed roused her at five o'clock, the rain had stopped and the storm was over.

IT WAS just beginning to grow light outside. Toni dressed quickly, made herself coffee, washed the cup and saucer, emptied two ashtrays and got into her black linen suit. She had no appetite and breakfast on the road would break the journey. She carried the bags downstairs, ran the Chevrolet out of the garage and put the bags in the back. It wasn't, she thought, surveying its mud-splashed bulk, an impressive vehicle, but she had made over her share of the Buick to Frank and he had driven it west. She had wanted a car to go south in, wanted one there. William had warned her they were hard to come by in Charlottestown and she had had to take what she could get. As a matter of fact, she had been lucky. The Dodges had let her have the Chevrolet for practically nothing.

The dawn was sweet, chill. There was a mist over the meadows. It was going to be a fine day. The soft gloom under the apple trees, the roll of the lawns, the bright fire of marigolds and zinnias in the borders along the terrace, the great green candles of the two fat maples beyond the rim of the hill, had never looked so beautiful. A wave of regret at leaving them, at leaving the house itself, swept over her. She gave herself a reproving shake. Taking a last look around and locking the door, she reminded herself that this wasn't the end, she would be back. She and William might spend some of their summers here. Five minutes later with the last of her stuff stowed conveniently inside the shabby black sedan, she was heading west for the Merritt Parkway and the South.

Toni made good time. The parkways were almost empty at that hour. The Merritt, the Hutchinson, the Cross County and then the Henry Hudson and the West Side Highway. Both the *Queen Mary* and the *America* were in, superstructures tall and proud against the blue water of the Hudson. To the left the serried granite of apartments on the Drive reared into the morning sky. Lower down, the sun, just up, struck fire from the tops of the Empire State and the Chrysler. The Holland Tunnel after that, and then the Pulaski Skyway, with Newark a distant and diminutive clutter of roofs far below.

South of New Brunswick, Toni swerved into U. S. 130 and on into gently rolling farm land, interspersed with fruit orchards and immense chicken runs. Farther along came vegetables in long rows, tomatoes glinting like rubies on their heavy vines, and broccoli and cabbage and eggplant and spinach.

PRESENTLY the Chevrolet began to annoy her a little. It didn't seen to have as much power as it had when she had driven it home from the Dodges the other day—but it was probably all right. Bill, the mechanic at Upton's garage, had said it was in good shape when he got it ready for the trip.

The road was beginning to crowd up, but not too much. Toni took the New Castle ferry across the Delaware. She was beginning to feel hungry, started looking for a place to eat, didn't, as usually happens, find one to her liking and finally compromised on a tired-looking restaurant and bar on the main street of a town called Stoningham.

She had to park across the street behind a big truck loaded with heavy packing cases. The place wasn't so bad once you got inside. It was neat and clean, with a long bar down one side and rows of tables on the other. The bartender was an amiable fellow with a broad, pleasant face. He brought her her cocktail and beckoned a waitress. The drink tasted good but she had to have food too. She ordered bacon and eggs and coffee. She was finishing her coffee and lighting a cigarette when the interruption came.

Two men drinking beer had just gone out and the bartender was standing at the window gazing into the street. Suddenly he turned, his face red with excitement. "Hey, Miss, Miss," she shouted, running around the end of the bar. "That's your car over there, that black Chevvy sedan. I saw you

get out of it. There's a man trying to drive it away."

The bartender was at the door and out of it, words trailing over his shoulder. Toni jumped to her feet, swept up her purse and gloves and followed. When she reached the sidewalk the bartender was in the middle of the street, white apron flying. An advancing truck cut off her view and brought her to a halt. When she finally reached the Chevrolet it was empty. Standing on the pavement beside it, the bartender was giving forth vigorously in the middle of a small crowd.

"It was a snatch, I tell you," he said. "I saw it with my own two eyes. This fellow comes up to the car, looks up and down, then he opens the door and starts to slide under the wheel. When I yelled and started across the street, he jumped out, slammed the door and beat it. If that truck hadn't of held me up, I'd have caught him red-handed."

There was a difference of opinion among the bystanders. A short, stout man disparaged the Chevvy judiciously. "Might be, but it ain't much of a haul to go for in broad daylight." He kicked a tire appraisingly. A gangling boy suggested that it was the stuff inside the fellow might have been after. "That bag there on the floor, and that coat over the back of the front seat." A woman insisted that the so-called thief might have mistaken the car for his own. The very same thing had happened to her last week.

Toni cut the debate short. She drew the bartender aside, thanked him, slipped a five-dollar bill into his hand, and drove off. Whether or not an attempt on the car had been made, the man had meant well. Nevertheless, as she put the town behind her she resolved that the next time she stopped anywhere she would lock, not only the ignition, but the doors.

Route 13 was pleasantly uncrowded. The Delaware roadbed was good, the landscape gentle and rolling. There was a mild pastoral flavor to the low swells of that part of the state. Blue sky, trees, open pastures dotted with cattle; she wondered whether Georgia would be anything like it. She had never been there, but William had showed her pictures of the factory he owned and operated, and of his mother's house outside the town, a rambling white house among trees. The photographs gave no idea of the general terrain, and they weren't going to live with his mother. William had already bought the place where they were going to live.

TONI frowned at cows lying down in shade beyond a crumbling stone wall. She shouldn't have been annoyed when William wrote her about it. He wasn't at fault. When he was up in July for three days to say goodbye to Frank, she had told him she would marry him and had accepted his ring. She had known that with Frank and Cricket gone, she was going to be very lonely, and William had been part of all their lives for years. He and Frank had gone through college together, he had been Frank's best man when Frank married Cricket, he had been at the house on visits over the holidays for years. With William, who was kind and sweet and understanding, the aloneness she had been afraid of would be pushed away. Her work was interesting enough and she had done well at it, but the office and blueprints and her chief, Mr. Denny, all brains and a large head and a wife and nine children, had begun to pall. She had long ago decided that social life was a dead end and that the career she was following was not constructive, led nowhere.

Nevertheless, after she and William were engaged and ring was on her finger and he had returned to Georgia, she had been upset at his buying the house in which they were both to live, without her having any choice in the matter. She thought back, with a smile, over his letter announcing the purchase. "Dear Toni. I have a surprise for you Knowing that—" She had skipped his preamble. William was a dear but he liked to say things the long way. "So I seized the opportunity of getting hold of the De Long place as soon as it came on the market." His description of the house he had bought for them followed. There was a good deal of ground and there were trees and the house itself was old, William knew she liked old houses. Altogether it sounded very pleasant. Then why was she annoyed? Toni sent the car zooming forward. She was annoyed because oneness was what she was looking for, because she and William were going to decide things together and

she had had no choice as far as her future home was concerned, because William had decided that for himself, without her.

Toni, your name is unadulterated ego, she thought acidly, slowing for a parade of chickens near a farmhouse. She would have to get loose from individual living, slough it off. Marriage was a partnership. She pressed hard on the brake. One chicken, a dusty brown and white hen, couldn't make up her mind. The wretched creature got into the middle of the road, screeched, flapped her wings, and ran back again. That hen, Toni decided with a satirical flicker, is me. I can't make up my mind either. Something like a chill ran up her spine. She put her shoulders hard against the cushions and let her hands go lax on the steering wheel.

What was she thinking of? She had made up her mind, of her own free will. The die was cast. She had resigned her job, she had written Frank and told all her friends. She was on her way to Georgia, where she and William were to be married. It was, anger quickened in her and she sent the little car forward with a leap, it was the Club last night that had unsettled her, and Anita Blackwell's response to her news, and the peculiar man with the blond hair and insistent eyes whose name was Clark Whitney. Why had he stared at her like that? Why had he singled her out to look at so penetratingly? And then there was his odd behavior later. She went on thinking about him.

The little room in which he had been standing with the lights out, bent forward, peering through the window, was never dark or closed. Overflow couples from the cocktail lounge, the bar and game room, often sat there. Mr. Clark Whitney had closed the door and switched off the lights for his own purposes. The better to see you my dear, and not be seen. He had been watching someone or something through the window. Was it possible that he was, in spite of his appearance, a private detective spying on some of her friends? Forget about him, Toni told herself shortly. Mr. Clark Whitney wasn't important, and she wasn't going to see him again.

The sun was lower now and shadows were beginning to lengthen. The car chugged sturdily along. She was over the border of Delaware and into Maryland. Cars passed her at intervals, Cadillacs and Buicks and occasionally, a Lincoln, as though she were standing still. But in spite of the sluggishness of the Chevvy's motor she was still making good time. The land began to flatten out. Scrub pine lined the highway and the soil was sandy. To the right of the roadbed itself there was a small secondary track, six or seven feet wide, evidently intended for farm vehicles. Occasionally she passed a Negro, plodding along, reins in his hands, behind a mule. The sky itself had changed a little, too, it was wider and there was a feeling, a smell, of the unseen sea. Toni was out of Maryland and in Virginia, had passed a gentle-faced Negress in worn dungarees riding a somnolent donkey when she picked up, in the rear-view mirror, a big black car advancing on her from behind. The car was coming fast. It appeared to be in a hurry. She drew over to give it plenty of room to pass. The bend ahead was five hundred feet away and there was no oncoming traffic. Her hands tightened on the wheel. The big black sedan was advancing along the road as though she weren't there.

THE driver must be mad, Toni thought flashingly. What did he think he was doing? She was already over on her own side as far as she could go. Two short sharp blasts of the black sedan's horn sent fury dancing along her veins. What did the driver want her to do, get off the road entirely? Fear took the place of rage. The black sedan was going to hit her. The man at the wheel was either drunk or crazy. She swerved sharply to avoid collision, felt sand churn under her wheels. The Chevvy skidded, swung, and plunged toward the wide ditch on the other side of the foot path. She tried to hold the car in control but the skid was too sharp. A last fragmentary vision of shining black enamel rushing at her behind—her forehead struck the gear shift. Then there was nothing at all.

Some time later on Toni woke to find herself lying back on folds of her polo coat flung over the seat. The door beside her was open. A man leaning through it was bending over her. The man was wiping blood from her forehead with a handkerchief. It took a moment or two for Toni to get her bearings, reorient herself. The man said angrily, "Damn swine. Pushed you off the

road. Lucky I came along. Wish I could have caught him, but he just kept going. One of those road hogs. Are you hurt? How do you feel?"

Toni didn't feel at all well. Her head was pounding and there was a ringing in her ears. But it wasn't the physical misadventure that reduced her to speechlessness, put butterflies under her midriff. It was the fact that the stranger beside her, sponging her forehead gently and looking solicitously into her face, was Clark Whitney, the man she had last seen at the Club in Eastfield, almost two hundred miles away, the night before, and had not expected to see again.

II

"WILL there be anything else, Miss?" The chambermaid hovered attentively.

In front of the dressing table, leaning forward to scrutinize the strip of court plaster on her left temple, just barely visible below the hair line, Toni said, "No thanks, I don't think so. I'm sure I'm going to be all right. I'll see you tomorrow before I go."

The chambermaid went out. Toni bent closer to the mirror. The doctor had said that the cut on her forehead wasn't going to leave a scar. She had been remarkably lucky, all things considered. She pickel up a powder puff and dusted the adhesive tape lightly. That was better. Now you could scarcely see the bandage. It wasn't serious, just a scratch really.

She got up and went over to the window of the pleasant room in the hotel to which Clark Whitney had brought her under convoy. The Chevvy wasn't damaged, and after she had had a drink from a flask he carried in the pocket of his tan raincoat and had rested a little, she had felt well enough to drive this far. She wasn't much short of her goal. Cape Charles was only five miles away. Looking out at blue water showing through tall pines she thought, "I was wrong about Clark Whitney. Actually he's very nice." Off to the left, dimly visible through the late light was the tip of the cape and the ferry across Hampton Roads she was to take in the morning.

Yes, she had been completely off the beam about Clark Whitney. He had been extremely kind, and there was nothing miraculous about his being on the same road as she was. In the light of what he said, his staring last night in the Club was understandable. He had heard her telling the Blackwells that she was driving south and it had aroused his interest, as he was going south himself to visit a sister in Florida. He had made the trip often and had wanted to advise her to take the Cape Charles route, as it avoided Philadelphia and Baltimore and Washington, and was quicker in the long run.

He had been enraged about the car that had sent her off the road, wanted to know if she had gotten the number. When she said no, he grumbled at her humorously, "You women—"

He had backed her car from the ditch over which the front wheel hung and put it on the road again. After they got here and she was installed in this chintz-hung room, he had insisted on calling a doctor. The doctor agreed with what she knew, that the cut on her forehead wasn't serious, but he said that she had had a shock and advised her to take it easy. The only thing that worried her was William. William had expected her to be at McCarthy's Hotel in Cape Charles that evening. He might have telegraphed or phoned her there. Better call him, she decided, and let him know where she was in case he should be anxious about her non-arrival.

She went to the table between the two beds and picked up the telephone, got the hotel operator who connected her with long distance, and gave William's number. Sitting down on the edge of the bed and waiting for the call to be completed, she looked out at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. How lovely it was in the twilight between tree branches. William came on, and Toni suddenly felt nervous and ill at ease. He was an ardent advocate of safe driving. Could she make plain to him exactly what had happened, that the near accident had been in no way her fault? She was very tired. She said with determined cheerfulness into the mouthpiece, "Hello, William." William said, "Toni, my dear. I'm awfully glad to hear from you. Did McCarthy give you a back room? I telephoned to him this morning. I don't want you to be kept awake all night by the shunting of trains, in one of those rooms at the front."

TONI said quickly, "I'm not quite at Cape Charles, William. But I'm almost there. I'm at the Douglas Hotel, five miles away." She made no reference to her accident, simply said she was too tired to go any farther that day. William sounded slightly annoyed, but he was understanding about it. He conceded McCarthy's with a sigh, and gave her careful instructions about what ferry to take in the morning and where she was to stay the following night, at the Griswold, in North Carolina. "You'll like it, Toni. The food is good and the beds are comfortable. I've got a reservation for you." They talked on for a few minutes and then Toni hung up.

Sitting in gloom, hands folded in her lap, she gazed out at black pine branches in silhouette against the gale glimmer of distant water. She felt oddly deflated. Why? Analyze it, she thought. William had, there was no doubt about it, assumed a proprietary air that was—not pleasing. Before she had agreed to marry him, her whims, reasonable or unreasonable, had been law. Now there was a change, a difference. Was he one of those men who thought his wife was a chattel, a piece of property to be ruled, benevolently and with indulgence? Nonsense. She was imagining things. A man she knew as well as she knew William couldn't be like that. The phone at her elbow rang and she jumped.

It was Clark Whitney. He wanted her to dine with him. He said, "I've been talking to your doctor. He thinks you're all right but that you need cheering up. How about having dinner with me in the grill room downstairs? It's not too bad."

Toni thought a moment. She did feel low. The accident had depressed her, and she was also angry with herself because she hadn't told William the truth. A change of venue, to laugh and talk with a stranger and forget problems for a while, would be a relief. She said into the mouthpiece, "I think that would be very nice," and Clark Whitney said, "Then I'll meet you in the lobby in fifteen minutes."

Toni switched on the lamps and abruptly her mood changed. She felt light, gay, alive, found to her astonishment that she was ravenously hungry. Her bag and her dressing case were on the luggage rack at the foot of one of the beds. She had left the other bags in the car in the garage at the back of the hotel, but as there were attendants there they would be perfectly safe. The black linen suit she had on was wrinkled. It would be all right for tomorrow but she wanted something fresh. She took out a gray silk she had bought in New York at a horrible price and that she hadn't intended to wear until later on. There was nothing like dressing up for improving the morale. She slipped the gray silk over her head, shook shimmering folds into place and looked at her reflection in the mirror.

The dress did more for her than she had thought. It was severe but beautifully cut. She fastened pearls in her ears, put a string of pearls around her throat. The result was undeniably good. Picking up gloves, purse and white camel's hair coat, she left the room and went downstairs.

Clark Whitney was waiting for her in the lobby below, long tweed-clad length indolently extended in a chair in shadow, his elbows propped on the arms, his fingers tented. He was thinking deeply about something. Whatever it was, it was apparently unpleasant. He was frowning. His gaze fixed on nothingness was narrowly absent, almost grim.

Toni halted at the foot of the stairs. She had a sudden sensation of being a stranger in a strange place. What am I doing here, she thought, meeting this man? I don't know him from Adam, don't know anything about him. I'm making a mistake. It would have been more sensible to have had something to eat in my room.

She was standing there, hesitating, when Whitney turned and saw her. He got up and walked toward her quickly. Advancing on her his eyes had the same look they had had when she encountered his gaze in the Club in Eastfield last night—only more so. "Miss Thorne—" His open admiration took in every inch of her.

Toni felt her color rising. Whatever Clark Whitney's response to the dress, she thought, he ought to wait until he knew her a great deal better before giving such open expression to it. He must have sensed her recoil because he said in a soberer tone, "You look splendid, not at all as though you had just come through an accident on the road. I was afraid that head of yours might give you trouble. I hope you're hun-

gry." Toni said that she was and Clark Whitney said, "Good," and they went into the dining room.

IT WAS a spacious room with a beamed ceiling and old prints on the walls. The tables were neither too close together nor too wide apart, the appointments were excellent, the lights low and shaded. The table he decided upon had a reserved sign on it. Clark Whitney had a way with waiters. The reserved sign was whisked away and they were seated with flourishes. The headwaiter himself took their order. Under the benign influence of little neck clams and a delicious iced soup her companion advised, Toni's fatigue faded. So did her lurking sense of guilt. Clark Whitney was a pleasant stranger into whom she had run by chance. She would never see him again after tonight. It was true that she was going to marry William in a matter of days.

That didn't make it incumbent upon her to be rude and standoffish with every other man she met.

They talked easily, about general topics, and a little about themselves. Whitney was a lawyer by profession. He liked all sports, but his hobby was boats, that was why he had gone to Eastfield for the first leg of his vacation. The Inn was opposite the yacht basin where his cabin cruiser was anchored. He said he'd had a half notion to sail down the coast to his sister's but had decided it would take too long.

Between the entree and the soup they danced. Toni returned to the table with a heightened color. Clark Whitney was a marvelous dancer; had he held her a little more closely than was called for during the last minute or so? She had gathered that he was a bachelor and unattached, Toni knew without any particular vanity that she was attractive to men; better not let Mr. Clark Whitney get any false ideas about her. No, begin as she meant to go on, as you had to go on. The pattern of her life was immutably set.

The waiter brought their chicken cacciatore and at the same moment Toni produced William, throwing him almost bodily into the midst of the glassware and china, in rosy light, to the strains of La Paloma. With something less than her usual finesse she said baldly, "I'm going to be married in five days. I'm on my way to Georgia for my wedding."

Again as in the lobby, coldness invaded her and a sensation of having tried to step up a step that wasn't there.

"Really?" Clark Whitney said, without the slightest change of expression. "How nice for you, and for the man too, of course. I noticed your ring." He was using lemon with discretion. He began asking her questions about William, about Eastfield and her life there, about her work.

Angry at herself for having expected a different reaction and for having made a clumsily dramatic announcement that was wholly unnecessary, Toni talked animatedly. Gradually the ease she was simulating returned. They danced twice more. Clark Whitney's behavior, whatever she had imagined earlier, was impeccable. He was friendly in a light-hearted casual way, but that was all. And while his interest in the details of her life was merely social, it was warming. He really seemed to want to know. After dinner they had coffee in the lounge. When she finally looked at her watch, Toni was amazed to find that it was after eleven. The evening had passed like lightning. She got up with a little cry, said that she had to catch the eight o'clock ferry from Cape Charles in the morning, thanked Clark Whitney for a lovely time and said good night.

Upstairs, in the flowery chintz-hung room on the second floor, with a breeze off the water mitigating the heat slightly, Toni went to bed and fell almost immediately asleep, to wake in the middle of the night, her heart thumping. Somewhere outside the hotel but close to it, there were loud voices and running footsteps, whistles and shouts. Toni got up and looked out of the window but could see nothing. Presently the furore, whatever it was about, died down and she fell asleep again.

SHE had left a call for six-thirty. Promptly to the minute the phone rang. In spite of the early hour it was still very hot. What was it going to be like in the middle of the day? Dressed and ready, Toni followed the bell boy and her bags downstairs, wondering about Clark Whitney. He had said nothing about seeing her again, but he was going to his sister's in Florida and to get off

the Cape he would have to take the ferry. Perhaps he wasn't leaving that morning, perhaps he was going to stay on at the hotel for a day or two. The coffee shop was the only room open. Drinking orange juice and crumbling toast, Toni kept watching the door. She was frankly disappointed when Clark Whitney didn't appear. She would have liked to have thanked him more generously for his kindness.

While she was drinking her coffee and smoking a cigarette, the conversation between two men at the next table attracted her attention. They were talking about the uproar in the middle of the night. One of the men said, "Somebody tried to break into the hotel garage. The watchman was knocked out, but he's not seriously hurt, and nothing was stolen. The police got there before any harm was done." So that was what had caused the disturbance she had heard. Toni left the coffee room. There was no sign of Whitney anywhere in the lobby. He could, she thought a little disconsolately, have advised her about the best route from Norfolk to Charlotte. He seemed to know this part of the country pretty well and she was vague about that leg of her journey. Oh, well, she could get information at the first gas station she stopped at.

She went up to the desk and paid her bill. While the cashier was making it out, the clerk, a rotund sandy-haired man, asked her how she had enjoyed her stay with them. He beamed at her praise of the service and the food, told her, when he heard she was taking the Cape Charles ferry and going south, of a splendid place where she could lunch. "It's the White Lion and it's right on your route. Loti, the chef there, used to be with us here, and one of our men, Mr. Kiefer, is the manager. You'll like it," he assured her. "Remember me to Mr. Kiefer if you should stop in." Toni said he would, thanked him and joined the bellboy, waiting beyond the wide doors at the back of the lounge with her bags.

She had forgotten to phone for her car but the garage was only a step away, on the south side of the big graveled enclosure. She said to the bell boy, "Wait here and I'll drive up and you can put the stuff in the back," and walked over to the big doors and through them into dimness. A man was hammering iron somewhere and machines were whirring. Cars lined the walls. The Chevvy was at the back in the middle of a long row. Toni picked out its disreputable nose, went round a steel drum, and stopped short in front of a huge jack directly in her path.

It wasn't the jack that brought her to a halt. It was the sight of a hatless head, a fair head, pale yellow in the gloom. Clark Whitney hadn't been visible in the hotel lobby or in any of the downstairs rooms. He was there, some twenty-five feet from her at the door of the Chevrolet. He opened the door, bent forward and disappeared from view. What was Clark Whitney doing in her car? All Toni's earlier doubts and suspicions came rushing back with renewed force.

III

TONI did then, in the garage at the Douglas Hotel in Westbury, what she regretted almost before it was accomplished, because it resolved nothing. She walked quickly across the oil-stained floor and directly up to the Chevvy. The hammering had stopped and the click of her heels was sharp and distinct on cement. Clark Whitney heard her coming. He wasn't in the car but he had been leaning in. He straightened, stood erect and turned. He smiled at her. His "Good morning, Miss Thorne. How's the head? How did you sleep?" was spontaneous, cheerful.

Toni stared at him. She said coolly, "My head's splendid, and I had a marvelous sleep, thank you, Mr. Whitney. Did you want something in my car?" The demand was crisp.

If Clark Whitney got the edge in her voice, if it registered with him, he ignored it completely. He said blithely, "That's swell. I was afraid you might have had a bad night. Want something—? Oh, yes. I dropped a fountain pen yesterday afternoon when I was prying you loose from your steering wheel. Here it is." He stooped, took a pen from the floor, held it up to her and slipped it into the breast pocket of his tweed jacket.

Toni should have been convinced and wasn't. Saying goodby to him, paying the attendant, getting her bags, driving off and putting the hotel behind her, her suspicion

remained. Had she or had she not seen that fountain pen in Clark Whitney's pocket the night before? She couldn't remember. But the whole thing could have been pretense. He had heard her advancing on him in the garage. He could very easily have planted the pen on the floor and then conveniently retrieved it. On the other hand, why should he do a thing like that, stage so elaborate a pretense? There was nothing of value in her car itself, nothing Clark Whitney could possibly want.

She was puzzled and disturbed and uneasy as she sent the Chevvy forward. Scrub pine and an occasional house, Cape Charles began to loom up. There was more water showing and while it was very hot, the breeze was sweet and fresh and the skies were wide. She made the ferry in plenty of time. The sail was pleasant enough. Toni sat on an upper deck and looked out over stretching water at Kiptopeke in the distance and then at the receding tip of Cape Charles. Beyond was Fisherman's Island and the white finger of the Cape Charles lighthouse. She had more coffee in the dining-room and then walked around for a while, but persistently, at the back of her mind, Clark Whitney continued to trouble her. She liked him, she admitted that freely. In fact, had things been other than they were, she could have liked him a lot. That was beside the point. The real question was whether or not he had been searching her car. But there again she came up against a dead end. There was nothing in the Chevrolet that would be of the slightest interest to him, or to anyone else.

Clark Whitney apparently wasn't on the ferry, at least she saw no sign of him and if he had been there, considering his previous friendliness, he would almost certainly have sought her out. Again her vanity received a small hard slam.

AFTER leaving the boat and circling Norfolk, a horn behind her honked vigorously. Startled, Toni looked into the rear view mirror. It was Clark Whitney in his green Buick coupe. He had been on the ferry then, she thought. Odd that she hadn't run into him—unless he had deliberately kept out of her way. If so, why was he following her now? He wasn't following her. The horn was hail and farewell. At the intersection just beyond, the road forked. Her way led to the right. Clark Whitney swung sharply left, waved a hand, and disappeared into the pines.

At Holland, as William had directed her to do, she took 189, cutting off fifteen miles, then picked up 258; another ten miles brought her over the border of Virginia and into North Carolina. The land was flat and uninspiring, the fields poor, the small Negro cabins ramshackle and unpainted. Most of them were in a shocking state of repair. And away from the sea it was much hotter. There weren't very many people on the road and Toni had leisure to think as she drove.

She switched her thoughts determinedly away from the pervasive Mr. Whitney and turned them determinedly on William and their marriage. It had been five days away yesterday, today it was four. How quickly time passed. Somewhere deep inside of her she waited for her spirits to lift. When they didn't, she gave herself a sharp mental shake. What was the matter with her? She had accepted William of her own free will, because she wanted to be married, because she wanted to have a home of her own and an essential part in normal living. She had recognized, from the first, that she wasn't wildly, romantically, in love with William, but there were other bases, other foundations, for a happy marriage. There was liking and respect and devotion and mutual integrity. That being so, why did she feel a sense of constriction, of bonds, the advance of an inevitability from which, she realized with a growing feeling of dismay, she found herself ever so faintly shrinking? She refused to acknowledge that Clark Whitney had anything to do with it. He was attractive, undoubtedly, but she had met attractive men before and hadn't gone overboard about any of them. No, there was something elusive, ambiguous, in the man himself and in the peculiar way he dogged her footsteps that was making her uneasy, uncertain. It had nothing to do with her own relationship with William. Well, Clark Whitney was gone now and she could forget about him.

Murfreesboro, the Woodland, then Scotland Neck, the miles unrolled smoothly under the wheels of the stout little car, but it could have been better. Passing a log-

ging truck loaded with long pine trunks, she felt the lack of pick-up. Luckily there was nothing coming the other way. By twelve o'clock she was beginning to be hungry, but there weren't many eating places on the road. She thought of the inn to which the clerk at the Douglas Hotel had directed her. It was, she glanced sideways at the map on the seat beside her, only eighteen or twenty miles farther along. She got there just short of half-past twelve.

The White Lion was a long, low, log cabin affair set back among pines on a little hill. Toni went past a huge board with an atrocious painting of a lion's head on it, swung into the driveway and parked. Then, remembering her adventure of the morning before, when she got out she locked not only the ignition but the doors. There were five or six other cars in the graveled enclosure. She gave them an involuntary glance of which she was instantly ashamed. Clark Whitney's car was not there. It wouldn't be, of course. He had gone in the opposite direction, southeast, while she had been cutting southwest.

The heat was terrific when you stopped. Luckily the White Lion was air-cooled, and the dining room was large and pleasantly dim. Toni chose a table at one of the wide windows looking out into pines and a waiter came forward.

The clerk at the Douglas had been right. The food at the White Lion was excellent. Toni had finished lamb chops, broiled to perfection, and fresh green peas, and was beginning on a crisp salad when she first noticed the woman at a neighboring table. The woman was alone. She was young, thirty-one or two, or three, and she was in distress of some sort. Her voice and manner were quiet, as were her clothes, but they were extremely well cut. The curve of a black hat framing a pretty olive-skinned face, was highly reminiscent of Fifty-seventh Street. The woman had been crying and was trying hard to look as though she hadn't. She was in some trouble about having lost a bus. The waiter was talking to her about it, telling her regretfully that the next bus wouldn't be along until twelve o'clock that night. The woman had a charming voice. She said helplessly to the waiter:

"But I can't *possibly* wait that long. Isn't there any taxi service anywhere around here?"

The waiter shook his head sadly, then got an idea and went and fetched someone named Mr. Wilson, a short stocky man with glasses. But Mr. Wilson couldn't do anything for the woman. He was going in the opposite direction.

He said, "I'd like to, ma'am, but I've got to be in Wilmington tonight. If it was only yesterday, now, that you wanted a ride south, it would have been a pleasure."

"Well, thank you, anyhow." The woman tried to keep her voice steady, tried to smile. The effort was scarcely successful. Her wandering gaze lit on Toni, passed over her. She obviously wasn't seeing anyone. On impulse Toni got up and went over to the other woman. Pausing beside her table, she said hesitantly, "I beg your pardon, but I couldn't help overhearing. You're trying to get somewhere, aren't you?"

The woman looked at her blankly, then smiled an uncertain smile. She said, "Yes, I am. I missed the bus here, and I've got to get down to Littlefield as soon as possible."

"Littlefield?" Toni asked. "Where is that?"

"It's north of Atlanta," the woman said. "My sister"— Tears overflowed. She wiped them away with a tiny scrap of white linen. "My sister is ill there. I only got the telegram this morning. I live a few miles north of here and my husband left for Pennsylvania last night on a business trip in our car. We only moved into this section recently, so I don't know my way about very well. If I could get as far as Raleigh, I could probably pick up a train or a bus there."

Toni smiled. "What's the matter with your coming with me to Raleigh? I'm going that way."

"Oh, would you?" The woman was deeply grateful. Toni assured her that she was glad to be of assistance, she was traveling alone and had plenty of room, and they exchanged mutual introductions. The woman was a Mrs. Charles Hanford, Celia Hanford. She was, as Toni guessed earlier, a native New Yorker, and had recently married and come South to live. Her husband was in the cotton business.

They had coffee together and then the

waiter, a kind, droopy Negro, immensely pleased at the rapprochement between them, carried Mrs. Hanford's bag out to the Chevrolet. "It's not much of a chariot," Toni said as they started down the driveway. Mrs. Hanford said fervently, "It's got four wheels, which is all I'm really interested in. My sister needs me, and I want to get to her as fast as I can."

Toni was rather glad than not to have a passenger with her. Ordinarily she liked driving alone, but from the start this trip had gone wrong. The motor hadn't lived up to her expectations, the brake wasn't as tight as it should be, there was that attempt to steal the car at lunch yesterday and then, later in the afternoon, she had been run off the road. In addition, there was Clark Whitney. He had come to her assistance, it was true, and no one could have been nicer than he had been last night—but what had he been doing in the car that morning, or what had he intended to do that her arrival had stopped? That, when you came down to it, was the greatest puzzle of all. The black sedan was easily enough explained. There were plenty of reckless drivers on the road. But why should anyone have attempted to steal the car itself, and what was there in it that could possibly interest Clark Whitney?

Forget about it, she told herself wearily. Perhaps he had really lost his pen, as he had claimed.

A short distance beyond the White Lion, the road forked. The route Toni was following, 258, went right, around two sides of a triangle. The road to the left formed the third side of the triangle and on the map looked to be shorter.

It was. Mrs. Hanford knew the country. She had driven around it with her husband. She said, "Take the road to the left, it will save you ten or twelve miles," and Toni swung into the firm sandy track between tall pines and went on listening to Mrs. Hanford talk about her sister's children, a boy of five and a girl of three. The cool gloom of the woods, between pines marching right and left in unbroken ranks, was a relief after the glare of the open highway. There was no traffic, and there were no houses, not even a Negro cabin. The two women had the road entirely to themselves. They had proceeded along it for perhaps five or six miles when Mrs. Hanford began to show signs of nervousness.

"I *think* this is right," she said, staring through the open window, "but I'm not quite sure. Perhaps it was at the fork farther along that we should have turned. It seems to me that on the road I took with Charles there were more houses and two or three crossroads."

Certainly there were neither houses nor crossroads on the road they were on, but as they went around a gentle curve they saw a car out in front of them. The car was proceeding at a leisurely pace. Mrs. Hanford said, "Oh, good. We can ask the people in that car whether this road leads to Brownsville, and then we'll be sure." Toni narrowed the distance between the Chevvy and the car ahead. Suddenly she took her foot off the accelerator. The car was a big black sedan. It had swerved. The driver was turning. He wasn't turning. He was standing still. Toni's heart did a dance upward. The truth came to her in a single blinding flash. The black sedan in front was the car that had pushed her into the ditch outside Westbury the afternoon before. It was blocking her advance now. It stretched completely across the road, and it was a long car.

PERSPIRATION ran down Toni's forehead and into her eyes. There was no chance of getting past the black sedan. She was going to have to stop. Or was she? Every instinct in her cried out against it. But—how not to stop? She raked the immediate foreground frantically. The black sedan was now less than a hundred yards away. To the left of it, there was a ditch. The ditch was deep. No passage there. To the right, a strip of ground sloped up into the trees. The strip, no more than six feet wide, was covered with tufts of matted grass and small pines and tree stumps. It looked impossible, it was certainly dangerous. It was better than being trapped here, and robbed, and perhaps killed.

Toni set her teeth and brought her foot down hard on the accelerator. The Chevvy was sluggish and refused to take hold. The gap between the two cars grew shorter. Toni kept her foot down. The engine began to respond. Faster, she was going faster. A man had gotten out of the black sedan and

was waving his arms. She didn't look at him directly, she kept her eyes, all her attention, on that narrow path to escape. Thirty feet from the black sedan she gave the wheel a turn and left the road. The Chevvy hit the rough ground and bucked. Toni's head struck the ceiling. Mrs. Hanford lurched against her and screamed. The wheel was out of control. It swung like a wild thing. Toni fought it, hanging on desperately. Beside her, Mrs. Hanford cried out above the rushing of the wind, "Stop—stop! We'll be killed." She screamed again and wrenched at Toni's arm.

The Chevvy, now almost level with the black sedan, was at a sharp angle, the right wheels three feet higher than the left. Were they going to turn over? They were level with the sedan, were past it. Toni tightened her grip on the wheel and hit the road on the far side—only just in time. Another instant at that perilous cant and the Chevvy would have been over on its side.

Mrs. Hanford had stopped screaming. Had she fainted? Toni didn't stop to look. She gave the engine all it had and streaked on. The sedan would come after her, of course. It was a big car of some sort, a Buick or a Cadillac. Her advantage lay in the fact that it was big, that it would be combersome to turn, and that it would have to start from scratch. Three miles, four, five, and a crossroad and houses; small and mean as the tiny settlement was, Toni's heart leaped up. Just beyond the clutter of roofs, visible through the thinning trees, was Highway 258, with cars proceeding along it at measured intervals. She turned into the highway behind a Coco-Cola truck, heaved a long sigh, eased up on the gas, turned her head and looked at her companion.

Mrs. Hanford was lying back against the seat, her eyes half closed. Her face was paper white. She met Toni's eyes, tried to smile, and sat up. "I thought we were going to be killed," she said weakly, pulling her skirts down and straightening her hat. "If we were, it would have been all my fault. We should never have taken that short cut. Do you think those men were going to rob us? Or were they just lost and did they mean to ask us the way? Or were they stuck or something?"

This latter was an idea that hadn't occured to Toni. It could be true; she didn't believe it. There were hundreds of black sedans abroad, thousands of them, but she was sure, or almost sure, that the black sedan blocking the road back there in the woods was the same car that had pushed her into the ditch in Virginia yesterday afternoon. There was no sign of it in the rear view mirror and she was safely ensconced between the Coco-Cola truck and an orderly Ford, but another idea occurred to Toni during that headlong dash. Mrs. Hanford, as she admitted herself, had proposed the short cut. Could Mrs. Hanford have done it deliberately? Was she, by any chance, mixed up with the men in the black sedan? Looking at her companion, listening to her talk, Toni dismissed the suspicion as untenable. In the first place, Celia Hanford wasn't the sort of woman you could imagine as being involved in highway robbery, voice, manner, bearing, even her quietly smart clothes, negatived the idea. And then she would have had no possible way of knowing that Toni herself was going to stop at the White Lion for lunch. Moreover there had been no woman in the car that had pushed her off the road yesterday afternoon, that much she was sure of. As for Mrs. Hanford's clutch at her arm back there in the woods, that had been produced by hysteria.

Mrs. Hanford said so. She spoke forlornly, using lipstick. "I was frightened out of my wits. You were wonderful, absolutely wonderful. The way you kept your head—I would have given up at once. I'm really a frightful coward. What are you going to do about it, Miss Thorne?"

Toni had been debating that with herself. Suppose she went to the police, what could she say? That a black sedan had parked across the road apparently trying to bring her to a halt? They'd ask whether she had actually been stopped, molested in any way, would want a description of the car and its license number. She hadn't the slightest idea of the number, could never remember her own number without consulting her wallet—and there were a lot of black sedans on the road. As for the man who had jumped out and waved at her to stop, she hadn't the faintest notion of what he looked like. She had been going far too fast and her attention had been elsewhere. She said doubtfully to her companion, "I

don't know that there's anything we *can* do. Besides, if we get mixed up with some small town policemen, they may keep us, and it's getting on." She glanced at her watch. "It's ten after two now, and if possible I want to reach Charlotte before dark."

Mrs. Hanford was still upset. "It does seem as though it was a horrible thing to have happen. Something ought to be done about it. But perhaps you're right, and I *am* worried about my sister and I do want to get on myself. I'm hoping for a train, or perhaps a plane, at Raleigh."

But when they reached Raleigh at a few minutes of three, Mrs. Hanford again found herself in a dilemma. She went first to the railroad station. Toni waited outside, glad to rest for a few minutes, her arms were tired from the bucking of the car earlier and the heat was dreadful. But she didn't want to linger too long. Mrs. Hanford rejoined her in ten minutes, advancing across the platform with a bouyant step. She was really a striking looking woman with her tall slender figure and her small poised head, Toni reflected. The lines had ironed themselves out of her face and she seemed at least ten years younger.

"Good news," she cried, pausing beside the door of the car. "My sister is very much better. Her blood count is down and her temperature almost normal. The doctor is sure the crisis is past, and that she's going to pull through. They simply pumped penicillin into her, and it worked. I talked to the doctor myself. She's still ill but the worst is definitely over. I feel terribly happy about it."

Toni told her how glad she was, and asked about trains. Mrs. Hanford said, "Oh, that. I'm afraid I'm in for quite a wait. There's no train for five hours. I can't get a plane either, and the next bus won't come through until nine tonight. But now that Susan is on the mend, I really don't care. Won't you come and have a drink with me? You've really been wonderfully kind and I think you need a drink after that experience of ours."

"I'd like one," Toni said. "I do feel jaded."

A FEW blocks from the station they found a small restaurant but the word bar over the door was strictly illusive. It was a bar but it was a milk bar. There was nothing to be had but soft drinks. Mrs. Hanford put her hand to her forehead, tapped it. "I have absolutely no brains. Of course we can't get a drink. Coming from New York I keep forgetting. And George always carries a flask. We could go to an ABC store."

But Toni was more than content with iced tea. Over tall glasses, cool in their fingers and pleasant to the touch, she said, "It's really too bad you have to wait around here for four or five hours, but I suppose the train will be faster in the end."

Mrs. Hanford put down a quarter of lemon thoughtfully. "I'm not sure it will be, at that. If I take a train later on today, I'll have to go all the way into Atlanta and then change to a branch line going north to Littlefield. I wish I could have gotten a plane. The branch trains are completely unpredictable. I won't get to Susan's until some time tomorrow afternoon." She hesitated. "You *are* going on to Charlotte tonight, Miss Thorne?"

Toni said yes. "I'm going to the Griswold, a hotel three or four miles out of Charlotte. I have a reservation waiting for me there. Why?"

Mrs. Hanford said, "Then if you really wouldn't mind, if it wouldn't be imposing on good nature, perhaps you'd let me go on with you. From Charlotte on your way to Atlanta we pass within seven or eight miles of Littlefield. There's a big garage in Stonyhurst, which is right on the route you'll be taking, and I can get a car there and drive straight to my sister's."

Toni was silent for a moment. She had been through a terrifying experience. Common sense told her that Mrs. Hanford had nothing whatever to do with it. But even say, for the sake of argument, that she wanted to be alone, how could she decently refuse her companion's request? She could, of course, but it would be a hard thing to do, and there was really no reason why she should be so rude. It was still broad daylight, the roads were well traveled, and they would be in the outskirts of Charlotte before dark.

Mrs. Hanford was looking at her anxiously. Ashamed of her slowness, Toni said with a quick smile, "I'll be more than glad to have you with me.—It's rather tiresome

driving by one's self," and signaled the waitress.

It was almost half past three when they left Raleigh, but they made good time. The country had changed somewhat. It was more rolling, higher, and everywhere there was red earth. The mountains to the west were not yet visible but foothills began to appear, a distant blue in the hot afternoon light. Mrs. Hanford was a driver herself, and after an hour or so, Toni agreed with alacrity when she offered to take the wheel. It was pleasant to sit still and do nothing for a while.

The sun was dropping lower. The beginning of evening announced itself, with cows streaming homeward across the fields and an occasional clatter of milk pans from scattered farmhouses. They were covering ground. Beyond Ashboro, Toni exchanged places with Mrs. Hanford. "Not too far to go now," she said, "We have only about another hour."

In just under an hour they picked up the sign post labeled, Charlotte, 22 miles. The Griswold, the hotel at which she was to stay for the night, and where William had arranged her reservation, was on their side of the city. They reached it just as the sun dropped, delightfully, below the horizon. Almost at once it was cooler. The Griswold was an extensive place. The main building, a square pillared white house, stood back from the highway in well kept gardens under tall trees. It looked like an old plantation house. There were some rooms in the main building, other guests were accommodated in individual cottages surrounding it in a wide semi-circle. The lawns were beautifully smooth, hoses were playing in the evening light, and two peacocks strutted across the broad terrace at the front of the hotel itself. Toni turned in the gate and went up the graveled driveway. A man in livery came down the steps under the port-cochere. He opened the door. Toni said, "I have a reservation, but this lady with me hasn't. Don't move the bags, please, until I find out where our rooms are."

Inside the wide spacious hall, they both registered. The clerk was able to take care of Mrs Hanford but their cabins were some distance apart and Toni dropped Mrs. Hanford at hers first and then went on, past a pool where children were splashing in brightly colored bathing suits, past a croquet lawn, around a miniature golf links and on in among the tall trees to her own cabin to the left of the main driveway.

The attendant was waiting for her with the keys. There was a one car garage attached to the pretty white building. The man wanted to know whether she wanted the car driven into the garage but Toni said, "No, I'll just leave it here. It doesn't look as though it's going to rain," and got out, stretching tired limbs and indicating to the attendant the bags she wanted. She had no intention of dressing that night.

Inside the bright little cabin, she tipped the attendant, shut the door and looked around. William had said the Griswold was good, and it was. Pretty chintzes, a wide low bed, a dressing table, lamps, two comfortable arm chairs and a diminutive neat bath; the man had opened the windows before he left and while it was still very warm the air was fragrant with the smell of the pines outside.

Toni threw cold water on her face and hands, did her hair, put on powder and fresh lipstick and let it go at that. She had arranged to meet Mrs. Hanford in the lounge in the main building. She locked the door of the cabin behind her and then, passing the car, locked its doors. Her polo coat, gloves and dressing case were inside. Besides, after what had happened, she wasn't taking any more chances, although to be fair, the Griswold didn't look like the sort of place where anything indecorous would happen.

The smell of the pines was really delightful. Drawing it in gratefully, Toni strolled across the main driveway, the lawns, went down a stone path between flowering bushes beyond which people were sitting in lounge chairs under gay umbrellas, mounted the terrace steps and entered the lounge. The long room was cool and dim. A dozen men and women were scattered about, reading and talking. Mrs. Hanford wasn't among them. Toni wandered over to a window at the far end of the lobby that gave on the cabins on Mrs. Hanford's side. She was standing there idly, smoking a cigarette and gazing out into the fragrant dusk when her glance stood sharply still and the cigarette all but dropped from her fingers. The woman for whom she was waiting was

there, not thirty feet away, at the edge of the croquet field, but Mrs. Hanford was not alone.

Standing beside her, talking to her intimately, head bent, his hands thrust into his pockets, was Clark Whitney.

IV

"I BEG your pardon." Toni drew back from the florid elderly man in the white suit into whom she had crashed blindly on her way through the lounge doors. The man's outraged expression changed as he looked at her. "That's quite all right," he said affably, "My error, my dear child." Toni went past him without another glance, across the terrace and down into the garden, glad that it was almost dark, that there were tall shrubs around her, that she was alone. Her anger was furious. She had been taken for a ride, made a fool of. Her earlier suspicions of Celia Hanford and of Mr. Clark Whitney had been entirely correct. They were friends, associates. What had she herself blundered into? What was going on? Her fury began to subside. Coldness took its place.

She had done enough wandering around in a fog, failing to add two and two. She had behaved like a child—and full advantage of her naivete had been taken, first by Clark Whitney, and then by the elegant and distressed Mrs. Hanford, her erstwhile passenger. Mrs. Hanford's sick sister was a myth. So was Clark Whitney's sister. The two of them were undoubtedly in collusion. But to what end and for what purpose? She tested this conclusion, analyzed it carefully. Clark Whitney had said goodby to her that morning, bound for a point more than two hundred miles to the south and east. Shortly thereafter she had encountered Mrs. Hanford at the White Lion. The encounter had appeared to come about by chance. What a fool she had been. Without doubt, there could *be* no doubt, although she hadn't seen either of them early that morning, one of them had overheard her conversation with the clerk when she had paid her bill and had learned where she was going to stop for lunch. They had fixed a clever little trap—and she had fallen into it headlong.

Mrs. Hanford's direction to her to take the side road had been deliberate. Whoever and whatever the men in the black sedan were, they were certainly connected with Mrs. Hanford and therefore with Clark Whitney. But *why* had that attack, an attack she had thwarted by a lucky chance, been made on her? Toni found herself at the edge of a small pool. She gazed fixedly at water lilies in the last of the twilight. The attack hadn't been made on her primarily! It had been made on the car, the battered Chevrolet she had bought from the Dodges just a short time ago.

The attempt to steal the Chevvy while she was lunching the day before was genuine. The man in the black sedan that pushed her off the road later in the afternoon, wanted the Chevvy. Her pulse quickened and a chill finger of fear touched her alerted nerves. That thwarted burglary in the hotel garage last night, was that a part of the plan to get hold of her battered car at any cost? She decided that it was. And then there was Clark Whitney's interrupted search of the Chevvy that morning.

Toni walked slowly in the direction of her cabin, wrestling with the why of all these incidents. There was nothing of value in the car, as far as she knew. But suppose the Dodges had left something valuable in it. The lantern over the door of the little cabin was lit. It didn't give much light, but it gave some. Toni came to a halt under pines and stared at the Chevvy's bulk thoughtfully. It certainly didn't look like a car that was the focal point of so much endeavor, one hub cap gone, a fender dented, and a '41 model at that. She frowned at the license number in gloom, Z-657-21 Conn. It didn't look right. Wasn't there another number in place of the 6? Wasn't it 4, or 9? She had never been able to remember the license number of the Buick she and Frank had shared. There was one way to make sure. Hadn't she put her driver's license and registration, together with the bill of sale, in the glove compartment before she started out?

SHE opened her purse, took out the keys and unlocked the right hand door. Leaning in, she pressed the button of the glove compartment. The little door fell horizontal. Toni reached in. Her fingers encountered a package. She pulled it out and glanced at

it. It looked like stockings or gloves, probably something that Margery Dodge had left there and forgotten. Toni thrust the paper warpped box into the pocket of her polo coat and went on feeling around. There was nothing else in the compartment. Of course. She straightened, her wallet, the wallet containing her driver's license and registration was in her black leather bag in the cabin. She crossed the grassy rise under tree branches, mounted the steps, unlocked the door and went into the small pretty room.

Her black bag was lying on the dressing table. She opened it and got the wallet out. Z-657-21 was the number on the car outside. The number of her car, the car she had bought from the Dodges was Z-557-9. Toni's hands fell to her sides. She stared blankly at folds of a chintz curtain. She had the wrong car. The car outside belonged to somebody else. But how could she have the wrong car? She sent her mind laboriously backward. The Dodges had delivered the Chevvy a week ago Tuesday. She had driven it to the garage that Tuesday afternoon. It had remained there until this Wednesday, just before going to the Club, she had picked it up. She had driven to the Club in it. Light came flashingly. That was when she had taken the wrong car, when she left the Club in the middle of the thunderstorm, racing down hill and dashing into what she thought was her own Chevvy, and instead, driving this other one, the car outside, away.

Toni wheeled. She went outside. She opened the door of the Chevrolet and got in. She swept up her possessions rapidly, magazines and a couple of books and her coat, road maps and a package of cigarettes. She lifted her dressing case from the back, got out and returned to the cabin. But only for a moment. Locking the door behind her, she left the miniature house under the pines and walked rapidly across the driveway and through the gardens to the main building. Caution stayed her hurrying steps as she neared the terrace.

Through her own carelessness, she had got mixed up in some sort of frightful mess. Whatever it was, it was something big. What, she couldn't possibly guess. All she knew with passionate certainty was that she wanted no part of it, wanted no part of Clark Whitney or the dubious Mrs. Hanford or the two men in the murderous black sedan. Neither, on the other hand, did she care to encounter any of these individuals, just yet. That, she thought savagely, would be a pleasure, later, under the proper auspices. She studied the lounge through the screen doors; neither Clark Whitney nor Mrs. Hanford was in sight. The telephone booths, two of them, were off on the right beneath a curve of the staircase.

Toni went into the nearest booth. She put a nickel in the slot and dialed operator. For just a moment, before the operator came on, she had an impulse to call William. No, she thought, the mess in which she found herself was her own fault. She had walked off with someone else's car, a dangerous car. Perhaps a car that had been used in a crime. She had heard of such things, read of them. As a result of carelessness she had become entangled in a distressing situation. Put an end to it as soon as possible. Get the authorities first. They would know how to handle it. Operator said, "Hello," and Toni said crisply, "I'd like to speak to the Charlotte police, please. It's urgent."

"Just a moment, please." The operator made the connection and a man's deep voice with a soft southern slur to it, said, "Sergeant Bevens speaking. What can I do for you?"

Toni began to talk. It was rather difficult to explain so she went slowly. She gave her name, her address in Connecticut, told the sergeant that she was traveling south in a Chevrolet she had bought from friends not long before, to be married. She said, "I took a car that wasn't mine by mistake in the middle of a thunderstorm. Some serious things have happened to me in the car I took. Yesterday someone tried to steal it, and today two men in a black sedan tried to stop me on a lonely road. I need help."

At the other end of the wire the sergeant was kind, but unexcited. "Where are you, lady?" Toni told him. "I'm at the Griswold four or five miles out of Charlotte, to the north."

"And you think there's something phony about this car you say you took by mistake?"

"That's right." Toni controlled herself.

"Well, look," the sergeant said, "it's outside our jurisdiction but I'll tell you what I'll do. I know the Griswold. You stay right

where you are, and I'll get in touch with the state police. Don't do anything until they get there."

"Will it be long?" Toni asked impatiently.

The sergeant assured her that the police would be there soon, but that it might take a little time. "Don't you worry, Miss," he told her benevolently. "We'll look after things. You just take it easy."

Toni put the receiver back on the hook, opened the door and stepped out of the booth. She felt enormously relieved, and at the same time she was still shaken and upset. But help was on the way. The whole thing was out of her hands now. The police would have to take care of it. They would be there in half an hour, perhaps an hour at the most. Follow the sergeant's advice, she thought, and do nothing in the meantime. But to do nothing was not so easy.

Crossing a stretch of parquet between long windows and a grouping of chairs and sofas she caught sight of the woman who called herself Mrs. Hanford, which might or might not be her real name. Mrs. Hanford hadn't yet seen her. Ought she to duck, Toni wondered, and resisted the impulse coldly. There were other ways of handling the situation. She walked lightly on. Mrs. Hanford turned, saw her, and started forward.

TONI slowed. Before she could say anything Clark Whitney advanced on her unexpectedly from behind, so that all three of them stood together in a small knot. Mrs. Hanford was the first to speak. She said brightly, "Here you are, Miss Thorne. I've been looking all over for you."

"Really?" Toni said sweetly. "I'm sorry —I was talking to my fiance over long distance and forgot the time." She was acutely aware of Clark Whitney at her elbow. He spoke then and she was forced to turned toward him.

He said blithely, smiling down into her eyes, "We meet again, Miss Thorne. Fate is kind. I thought our paths had separated this morning, but I found that my sister, instead of being decently at home where she should have been, is gallivanting in Atlanta. Wretched creature. I went a hundred miles out of my way for nothing."

Toni smiled. Liar, she thought inwardly, her temperature at boiling point. How dare he stand there like that, tall and easy and lounging, with such a cock and bull story on his lips.

Mrs. Hanford was speaking. "Are you hungry, Miss Thorne?" she asked. "I'm starving." "I am too," Clark Whitney broke in. "They say the food's very good here. Would you ladies mind if I dined with you? Eating alone isn't much fun."

The farce had gone on long enough. Toni looked as directly into Clark Whitney's eyes as he had looked into hers a few second earlier. She then turned her glance on Celia Hanford. She spoke to them both. She said icily, "I'm sorry, but I, personally, am dining alone tonight," and walked away without a backward glance.

In the long dining room at the northern end of the lounge, she had Vichysoisse and a salad and pecan pie and drank coffee without tasting anything at all. She had chosen a table that put her back to most of the room, didn't look around once during the meal. She neither knew nor immediately cared how Clark Whitney and his friend, Celia Hanford, were passing the time. They would be taken care of presently, by the police. The thing in the world she wanted most was to get rid of all these dreadful people, and never see them again. She had called the police at seven-thirty. At twenty minutes past eight, just as she was rising from the table, the desk clerk made his way up to her. His face was long, worried. "Miss Thorne?" he said. "There's an officer in the lobby to see you."

Toni followed the clerk into an alcove beyond the desk. A tall man in the uniform of the state police, with a square dependable face, who introduced himself as Sergeant Bevens, said, "Miss Thorne?" and Toni said yes, and launched into her story.

Sergeant Bevens listened attentively, writing some of what she told him in a notebook. When she finished he said, "I think I've got that straight. Now, Miss Thorne, suppose we go out and take a look at this car."

He led her through a small door beyond the stairs. She was glad to have him beside her on the journey across the lawns and gardens. There were lights here and there but there was no moon and in between the lights it was dark. Across the driveway and

under the pines to Cabin Eight; the Chevvy was still there, drawn up ten feet from the steps. The state policeman had a torch. It a good one. Brilliance flashed over the car she had mistaken for hers. Sergeant Bevens marched around it. Toni leaned against a tree and lit a cigarette. The officer finished his survey of the car in which she had driven south. He closed the notebook and returned to Toni. He said, "Now, Miss Thorne, perhaps we can get things straightened out."

Toni took the wallet out her bag and handed it to him. He glanced at the pink and yellow slips protected by isingglass, left her abruptly, opened the Chevrolet's hood, flashed his torch, put the hood down and came back to her. Toni's heart began to thump. The sergeant was staring at her steadily. There was astonishment in him. He said gently, putting a hand on the fender, "The registration and license numbers tally." He extended the wallet to her, pointed to the license plate on the back of the car, standing where she had left it an hour earlier. "So do the motor numbers. I'm sorry, Miss Thorne," Bevens continued kindly, "but there never was any mistake. This is your own car."

Toni looked where the officer told her to look. He was right. The license plate was her own. She reached out in whirling shadows and steadied herself against the rough bark of the nearest tree.

V

TWO funnels of light from the Chevrolet's lamps illuminated the dark road ahead, but not sufficiently. The red earth at the sides gave no indication of where the road actually ended and the soft shoulder began, and when a car was coming the other way, it was difficult to drive. Toni liked neither the road nor the blackness nor this search for another roof at that hour of the night. She disliked still more, disliked beyond bearing, the idea of staying on at the Griswold.

The car in which she now sat was her own property. It had been substituted for the Chevrolet in which she had driven south while she was waiting for the police in the Griswold dining room. Whoever the other car belonged to, and whatever its significance, Clark Whitney and Mrs. Hanford were mixed up in it. They were staying at the hotel she had put behind her, which was why she had had to leave. Had one of them made the substitution while she was having dinner? She neither knew, nor cared, any longer. All she wanted to do was to get away from them. The whole succession of events had concerned the car she had misappropriated and had nothing to do with her personally. Now, with her own car back, she would be rid of threats and espionage and mysterious happenings and could go on her way unmolested.

Her exit from the Griswold had been unobtrusive. The sergeant had thought her mad, had smiled kindly, unbelievingly, at her attempt to explain, but that wasn't of importance either. After paying her bill and throwing her things helter-skelter into the back of the Chevvy, she hastily consulted her AAA book for another lodging for the night. There was a fairly large list of places near Charlotte. The list had narrowed. At a gas station a mile beyond the Griswold she had put in a hot and disappointing half-hour in a telephone booth. All three hotels in Charlotte were full and the tourist camps and guest houses on this side had no vacancies, but the gas-station proprietor had told her that if she went beyond Charlotte she would find two or three camps on the far side in which she was sure to get space for the night.

Ahead on the left scattered lights under trees came into view around a turn. It must be Oak Creek Cabins, for which she was looking. It was. Toni pulled in hopefully, but in vain. The man in the office was helpful, however. He said he thought she could get a cabin at Longview, half a mile farther on the right, telephoned to make sure. Yes, there would be a room for her at Longview. He said it wasn't too stylish a place but that it was clean and at that hour of the night she'd be wise to take it. Toni agreed. She thanked the man and went on relieved.

A curious lassitude filled her as she drove. She was safe now, she had put intrigue and strangeness and danger behind her. But why were the men in the black sedan, Clark Whitney and Mrs. Hanford, so interested in the car she had taken by error? No matter, she told herself, she would never see any of them again, including Clark Whit-

ney. Thank heavens for that, she thought, hands tight on the wheel. Her mystification remained. What was it all about? What was a man of Clark Whitney's manner, his bearing, *doing?* What was his place in the devious web? Forget about it. Clark Whitney need no longer concern her. Her strange and frightening adventure was at an end. Tomorrow night she would meet William in Atlanta, and take up normal living with a thoroughly normal person.

Lights again and a sign that said "Longview." Toni slowed, swung into a driveway and stopped at a little shack labeled "Office." There was no answer to her ring and the door was locked but a woman leading a child by the hand came forward through gloom from a lighted coffee room a short distance away. Toni gave her name and said that the man at Oak Creek had telephoned about her, and the woman pushed hair out of her eyes and said vaguely, "Oh, yes. Cabin Two is yours, Miss," and fished a key out of her pocket. "It's over there." She waved toward a row of buildings off on the left.

INSIDE the double cabin, of which she had the right half, Toni looked around with something approaching dismay. The Oak Creek man had believed in understatement.

The place was clean—which was all you could give it. A double bed took up two-thirds of the small oblong cubicle. The bare, white-washed walls were stained in places with damp and the rest of the furniture consisted of a rickey chest of drawers, three hangers dangling from a nail, and a single straight chair. The gray concrete floor was rugless.

Oh, well, she thought resignedly, it's only for the night. I'll be leaving very early in the morning. She had taken off her linen suit and was reaching for a robe when there was a resounding knock on a door in the inner wall at the far end of the room. Toni was startled. She went to the door and opened it. A stout red-faced woman with her hair in curlers, insufficiently draped in a large bath towel stood on the threshold. She said, "I'm Miss Elbridge in the next cabin. We share this bath. I'd like to take a shower now. Is it OK with you?" Her air was faintly truculent. Toni smiled, said it was certainly OK with her, and closed the door.

Ten minutes later she was in bed. The room was insufferably hot but there was nothing she could do about it. The window beside the front door was stuck, besides it opened on a general veranda. The window at the back gave on the slope of a hillside planted thickly with trees. She had propped it up with a stick evidently left there for that purpose, but there was no breeze whatever. The proprietor might have been more generous. The stick was only seven or eight inches long. She felt hot and sticky and kept turning restlessly from side to side on the lumpy bed, searching for a cool spot on the coarse sheets. Finally, under the influence of the aspirin she had taken, she fell asleep.

A long while later, Toni sat up with thunder banging loudly in her ears and her heart going like a triphammer. At first she thought it was actually thunder she heard. It wasn't. It was her neighbor banging loudly on the door of the bathroom, which Toni had locked before going to bed. She was in no danger here, but after her experience with the plausible Mrs. Hanford, she was taking no more chances with strange women. What was the trouble with her neighbor? Toni blinked sleep out of her eyes, got up and went quickly to the door.

The pounding and calling on the other side of it stopped as she spoke. She had to make herself heard. "What is it?" she called sharply. "What's the matter?"

The woman in the bathroom said, "Are you all right, Miss? There was someone trying to get into this place."

Toni did open the door then. Miss Elbridge was excited and alarmed. She talked volubly. She said she hadn't been able to sleep and a few minutes earlier had heard suspicious sounds among the trees outside. Then, while she was lying there, the moon came out and she had distinctly seen the crouched figure of a man slip past her window in the direction of Toni's. "Did he get in?" Miss Elbridge demanded. "Did you see him? Was it a thief? Did he take anything?"

Toni smiled a little. Her smile went away. The door of her room was still locked and nothing had been touched but—the window she had left propped up eight inches was

now open its fullest extent, and was held in place by a much longer stick than the one she had used, a crooked branch that had been placed there from the outside.

"Ha," Miss Elbridge cried in triumph. "I must have frightened the thief off. Sure he didn't take anything."

Toni was positive. Her two bags, with her polo coat thrown over them, were untouched. Her purse was under her pillow. She went outside accompanied by Miss Elbridge, to see if her car was all right. It was. The moon had gone behind the clouds again and the blackness was intense. Except for the white pool of radiance around the illuminated sign two hundred yards away at the entrance to the drive, nothing moved or stirred anywhere. The people who ran the place were probably fast asleep. The lights in all the other cabins were out. About to reenter the cabin into which Miss Elbridge had already gone to examine her own belongings, Toni stood still.

Near the distant light, on the fringes of it, something *had* moved. It was a man. One fragmentary glimpse and the man's figure vanished. In spite of the heat, coldness fingered away up and down Toni's spine. The distant man, only half seen and then not there at all, had looked remarkably like Clark Whitney.

Toni turned quickly, went into the cabin, slammed the door and locked it. Inside, she sat down limply on the bed. She was insane. It was her imagination. Clark Whitney had no way of knowing where she was, couldn't possibly have followed her here. The prowler was an ordinary sneak thief and had no connection with the sinister developments revolving around the Chevrolet. The people who had been after her wanted their car—and they had it back. But when Miss Elbridge proposed going down and informing the man and his wife who ran the place of what had occurred, Toni balked. She couldn't face the darkness outside. She said, "The thief, if there was a thief, is probably miles away by now. It will be light in less than an hour, and I want to be on the road early."

After that Miss Elbridge went back to her room to try and sleep and Toni smoked three cigarettes in a row, then took a shower, dressed, and shook the dust of Longview from her feet. She had paid her bill the night before. As the first pale gray of dawn began to spread in the east she turned out of the drive and headed southwest.

Mist was thick in the hollows, lay in veils over cotton fields and patches of marsh. Trees loomed eerily through the whiteness. The road was empty. Toni kept the needle at an even fifty. This car, her own Chevrolet, was much better than the one she had mistakenly appropriated. The sun came up, dissolving the mist but bringing with it an unwelcome access of heat. The country had changed again. The hills were higher, the towns more scattered. She had a late breakfast in Spartanburg, and fled on to Greenville, the next big town on the map. It lived up to its name, was lovely with trees and shade and pleasant old houses. She left it behind with regret, but she still had a long way to go. Far out in front the road ran straight for mile after mile. Traffic was sparse. There was just enough of it to be comfortable. Then, a short distance out of Anderson, she ran into an unexpected delay.

COMING over a hill, Toni saw a long line of cars drawn up ahead. She added the Chevvy reluctantly to the queue's tail. There were policemen at the side of the road, evidently some sort of examination was going on. It was probably the Department of Agriculture enforcing some pest quarantine, she decided, fretting at the delay. The heat was frightful, and there was no shade. Her turn finally came. She was asked politely to show her registration and driving license. The officer looked into the back of the car. He came back to Toni. He said, "Would you pull over over here a little, Miss?" and waved toward a red clay oasis at the side of the road. Toni complied, her temper mounting. "What's the matter, officer?" she asked sharply.

"Nothing, nothing at all," the trooper answered civilly. "Just a routine check, Miss. Just wait here and I'll be with you in a minute."

He walked over toward a group of men, said something to them, and came back with a tall man with a gray mustache who had a soldierly air. The tall man also asked to see Toni's driving license and registration. They appeared to interest him. He said,

"Eastfield, eh? That's in Connecticut, isn't it? I used to visit Connecticut myself. Coming south for a visit?"

"No," Toni said stiffly. "I'm on my way to Charlottestown, Georgia, to be married."

"Oh, indeed? I've got cousins in Charlottestown. Who's the lucky man?"

Toni's mystification grew—but if they wanted to know William's name there was no reason why she shouldn't give it. She told gray-mustache, and he nodded affably. "Mr. William Grant, eh? Sure, I know of Mr. Grant. That's a fine factory, they treat their people good." He continued to eye the licenses speculatively.

Toni's anger boiled over. "Aren't they all right? Is there anything wrong with them?" she demanded crisply.

The tall man came to with a start. He said, "Oh, they're fine. Sure! Have a nice trip," handed the wallet back to her and stepped back. Toni drove on seething. But she wasn't the only one suffering. Cars coming from the other direction were being stopped a little farther along. She went past them at a fast clip. Atlanta was a long way off and she didn't want to be late, nor did she have a fancy for any more night driving over dark roads.

ANDERSON delayed her a little, traffic was fairly heavy there, but the road beyond was reasonably clear. Five miles after she crossed into Georgia she stopped at a lovely old southern colonial house outside Hartwell for lunch. She had finished fried chicken and a cherry tart and was in the cool spacious hall on her way to the front door when a tall figure stepped out of the shadows and directly into her path. Toni looked up. Clark Whitney was looking down at her with a smile.

He said in the easiest possible tone, "Well—Miss Thorne, of all people! How are you? My luck is certainly in—or I hope it is. My car broke down just short of here with a resounding crash. The rear end appears to be gone. I've got to get to Atlanta tonight. You're going there, aren't you?"

Toni was too astonished at his audacity to speak. She simply nodded. He was telling her a palably wild tale. She didn't for a moment believe that his car had broken down. He had followed her here, accosted her, for a purpose. That was as far as she could get. But she was right. He immediately made his purpose plain.

"Well, then," he said, "as you are Atlanta bound I wonder whether you'd be kind enough to give me a lift?"

This was growing monotonous, Toni thought stupidly. Celia Hanford had obtained a ride with her as a passenger earlier, now Clark Whitney was going to try the same thing in another shape. Hadn't these people any invention? She regained the use of her faculties with a rush. Her eyes sparkled. She looked up at Clark Whitney, returning his smile. "Why not?" she said. "Of course I'll give you a lift. You can help me with the driving, if you will? It gets tiresome after a while, doesn't it?"

Clark Whitney agreed that it did. He had already lunched. Toni said, "Splendid, then we can leave right away. I'm anxious to make time. Just a second while I freshen up. I won't be more than a minute or two."

The powder room was around the corner to the left. Toni didn't stop when she reached it. Heat, waiters, the rattle of china, of glassware, and wisps of steam were issuing from a swinging door a little farther along. Toni went through the door and found herself in a small vestibule lined with empty garbage cans. There was a screen door at the far side. The door led directly into the enclosure where her car was parked. She unlock the Chevvy, got in, backed it out, headed down the driveway and went round a curve. The long veranda at the front of the building was above her.

As she went beneath it at a fast pace, she glanced up. Clark Whitney was there, standing beside one of the pillars at the head of the wide steps, waiting for her. He was going to have a long wait, Toni reflected with wry amusement. Throwing up a hand in mocking salute, she gave the wheel a twist and sped downhill under the pecan trees.

VI

WHEN she hit the main road, Toni didn't slacken speed. She kept glancing anxiously into the rear view mirror. Route 29 along which she was proceeding was the direct route to Atlanta. Clark Whitney's story about his car having broken down was nonsense. He knew the direction

in which she was heading. His car was a Buick, hers was a Chevrolet. Unless she got off route 29, no matter how fast she went, sooner or later he would catch up with her. On a long stretch of open road where the visibility was good, she held the wheel with her one hand, reached for the map with the other, and studied it. There was an alternate route. It was a blue route for the most part, and it was much longer and would take her a good distance out of way, but there was no help for it. She simply had to get off that road. Accordingly, at Danielsville she swung sharply right into 98 which went north instead of south as she should have been going. Another black mark against Clark Whitney.

The first exhilaration of having successfully shaken him off was gone. Resentment burned in her, and a feeling of outrage. The question was—why had Clark Whitney tried to get into her own car with her? If she had been right earlier, if it was the other car, the car she had mistakenly taken, that the people who had pursued and harassed her wanted, why this return of interest in her personally? Batter her brains out as she would she found no answer.

THE afternoon clouded over without getting perceptibly cooler. The road she was traveling wasn't too good. Driving up hill and down dale for mile after mile between stretches of red earth, thinly veiled with scorched vegetation, Toni kept glancing behind her. Gradually, when more than an hour had passed and there was no sign either of Clark Whitney's Buick or of any black sedan with two men in it, her tension relaxed.

But it had taken its toll. By mid-afternoon she was tired and depressed. The knowledge that she was drawing constantly closer to Atlanta and William failed to raise her spirits, in fact when she thought of it, they sank a little. Jefferson, left there and on to Braselton; the skies pressed down more heavily. Suddenly Toni faced the truth. It had been there for some time. She had tried to stave it off. Even as late as yesterday she had refused to acknowledge it. Now at last, when her journey was almost at an end, she knew she had made a mistake, knew the meaning of her reluctance to leave the house in Eastfield. She hadn't wanted to leave it because—she hadn't really wanted to come south and marry William. She liked William, she respected him, she had always found him an agreeable companion, and in the first lonely weeks after her brother Frank had gone west, she had thought she could learn to love him and that their marriage would be happy and successful. All at once she knew it was impossible.

Unbidden, pictures of Clark Whitney came across her mind. His face, his eyes, his voice, a quality of gentleness mingled with his strength, humor with his depth, the way he looked at her when they were dancing, the way he had held her, the laughter in him when they went back to the table, his ease of manner; she stamped on the accelerator, shot forward, and then made herself sit back. Whatever his outward appearance, she thought bitterly, Clark Whitney was not what he seemed. Like other women before her she had been taken in by a plausible front and a smooth tongue. She couldn't marry William, would have to tell him so. There was one thing she could do about Clark Whitney, and that was to forget him, expunge him from her mind as ruthlessly as she had removed him from a foreseeable future. He was not going to catch up with her now. They had separated for all time.

Toni's wrist ached from jerking the Chevvy to and fro over pot holes and it was a relief when at on toward half-past five, just beyond Duluth, she emerged on Highway 23. South now and directly into Atlanta—the smooth surface felt good under her wheels. There was much more traffic and towns were more frequent. Her gas was getting low, the gauge said less than five gallons which could mean there was considerably less in the tank. She swung into the first gas station on the right she came to. It wasn't much of a place. She had to wait for a car in front of her to be attended to at a single pump. Sitting tiredly back against the cushions, she lit a cigarette, listened absently to the gas station attendant, a tall raw-boned man in a plaid shirt talking to the other customer, and pricked up her ears. The gas station man was talking about the road block she had gone through in South Carolina that morning.

"Yeah, I heard about it," he was saying,

"two or three people coming down the highway was telling me. You know what it was about? I got a brother on the force in Atlanta. The police got a tip. They were checking on cars all along these routes. They think the gang that engineered that snatch up north, Connecticut I think it was, have a hideout down here somewhere in this section. What was the kid's name. Oh yeah, Billy Endicott."

Toni's heart stood still in her breast. She felt sick and at the same time frozen. The Endicott boy, a little child of five—. The police had held her up and questioned her, stiffly, because she had come from Eastfield. Clark Whitney had come from Eastfield too, a stranger ostensibly on a vacation at the time when Billy Endicott had been taken. . . . The car she had driven off by mistake had something to do with that kidnapping; Toni was sure of it. The woman, Celia Hanford, was in the plot. So were the two men in the black sedan. . . .

The Ford in front pulled out and Toni mechanically told the attendant to fill her tank and drove slowly on. She was filled with horror and revulsion at the thought of the kidnappers and the little boy in their hands, went back feverishly over every step of her journey south, looking for corroboration, clues. Go to the police at once, without the loss of a moment; the more facts she could give them, the better.

Toni's fingers tightened on the wheel and she drew breath in sharply as she thought of the package wrapped in brown paper that she had removed from the glove compartment of the other Chevrolet when she was still under the illusion that the car was hers. She had decided at the time that the package was something belonging to Margery Dodge. That couldn't be so. Excitement quickened in her, Toni steered her own car off the road, stopped in a hollow between two hills. Where was the package? She leaned over the seat, tossed folds of her polo coat aside and found it, with her books and magazines. She tore open brown paper, lifted a lid, and sat staring down at layer after layer of neatly stacked five and ten dollar bills. There were a great many of them. She put the cover back on the box. The feel, the touch of it, was terrifying. It was the price of a child's life and she had diverted it. She dragged her coat over the back of the seat, thrust the box under it, and gazed unseeingly at sheep in a huddle beyond a wire fence.

The currency in the box was ransom money. It was in the Chevrolet she had driven off from the Club in Eastfield. That was why the kidnappers had wanted to get the other Chevrolet back. One of the gang had driven her own car south in pursuit of her. Before she discovered that the car she was in was not hers, she had removed the package. And had promptly forgotten it. The kidnappers hadn't. After the switch they knew she had the money. That was why Clark Whitney had planned to travel with her that afternoon.

Deep shivers were going through her. Toni pulled herself desperately together. Where was Clark Whitney now? If only she hadn't lost sight of him she might have been able to deliver him over to the police and they could have made him tell where the child was. If only she hadn't left him behind her. It was too late for that now, she thought despairingly. But with the knowledge in her possession the police might still be able to save little Billy Endicott. They might. . . . If they found the kidnappers, found out where the child was hidden before it was too late. . . .

"Stop it," Toni told herself running the tip of her tongue over dry lips. She was less than ten miles out of Atlanta. She gave the Chevrolet all it had. Put herself into the hands of the first policeman she saw. He would know what to do. Perhaps it would be quicker to telephone. Telephone from where? There were no houses in sight. But there was something else. Rounding a long curve Toni saw it. The shock was dizzying.

For the last three or four hours she had given up her study of the road behind for traces of the black sedan or Clark Whitney's Buick. The black sedan that had tried to waylay her yesterday was there, three or four hundred yards in front of her, clearly visible in the fading light. She stared at it through the windshield, scarcely breathing. Yes, there was no possible mistake. There was a man at the wheel and beside him was a woman. The woman was Celia Hanford.

The black sedan was traveling at a moderate speed. Toni slowed a little. She mustn't be seen by the occupants. That would be fatal. Her brain was racing. All

along, at the best, the police had been a forlorn hope as far as actually contacting the kidnappers and rescuing the Endicott boy went. But there had been nothing else for her to do. Now the picture had changed. If she could follow these people to their lair, hideout, find out where it was, and then get hold of the police, if he was alive at all the boy would be saved. She had let Clark Whitney get away from her at noon that day. She mustn't let these people get away from her now. But she would have to use caution.

The black sedan was picking up speed. She mustn't lose it but she mustn't get too close. There were no other cars near. If she did stop one, or if she ran into a house and shouted her information aloud, by the time she made herself understood the black sedan would have vanished irretrievably. No, she dared not stop. Too much was at stake.

JUST short of the city limits, the black car ahead went right into a tree-lined street, then left, then right again. Presently Toni lost count of the twists and turns. Twice during that half hour's featureless and nerve wracking drive, she almost lost her quarry. Each time luck enabled her to pick the sedan up again, once because it stopped at a drug store. She caught it just as it was moving on. It was almost completely dark by that time, and her fear of being seen and recognized had lessened. She drew slightly closer, found herself presently in a wilderness of mean streets in a run-down section of the city. It was part residential, part manufacturing. Warehouses and empty factories alternated with shabby pine buildings and an occasional tenement. The street lamps gave very little light and there weren't many people about. How long was this chase to go on? It came to an end with startling abruptness.

The black sedan was slowing. It pulled into the curb and stopped just short of a corner. Toni applied her brakes in a hurry and came to a halt five hundred feet behind. What were the two in the sedan going to do? The blank wall of some sort of factory reared itself at the spot where they had parked. They couldn't be going into that. While she watched, her own lights extinguished, the doors of the sedan opened and in the dim illumination from the street lamp on the corner, Toni saw the man and Celia Hanford get out in a leisurely fashion, walk to the corner, around it, and out of sight.

Toni jumped out of the Chevrolet. They were evidently going into some building close by, on the street at right angles to the one on which they had left the black sedan. She had to find out where they had gone. She went forward, running, but watching the corner carefully as she approached it. Neither the man nor the woman reappeared. She must hurry. She was almost at the corner. She didn't reach it.

She neither saw nor heard the man who stepped out of a dark doorway of the deserted factory she was passing until she was seized. Without the slightest warning a rough hand was pressed over her month, her arms were pinioned to her sides and she was lifted and carried, struggling helplessly, through a door into blackness.

VII

WHAT time was it? Toni pushed disordered strands of hair from a wet forehead. The light in the wretched room was dim. It came from a bulb suspended on a cord from the immensely high ceiling. She looked at her watch. It was twenty minutes of eight. She had been there less than fifteen minutes. It seemed more like an hour since she had been pushed into the room and the door slammed and locked from the outside. The man who had deposited her here hadn't hurt her in any way. His very reticence, his lack of curses or threats, was frightening. He had simply said in a blunt expressionless tone as he put her unceremoniously on her feet on the rough oil-stained floor, "No use your doing any shouting, baby. You could yell your head off and nobody'd hear you. But it'll be better for you if you keep quiet, see?"

Toni hadn't attempted to scream, or raise an outcry. The hopelessness of doing so was pressed in on her by the place in which she found herself. The room in the apparently deserted factory was twenty feet square and almost as high. Pipes far up the walls were rusted and broken. There were no windows with the exception of one small one in an inner wall that gave on either another room or an airshaft. Light fell

through it on stained plaster beyond. There were rough shelves around the lower walls. They were empty. For the rest there was nothing but a pile of discarded paint rags in one corner and a clutter of empty boxes and barrels in another.

Toni jumped up from a wooden box she had been using as a chair and began to walk around aimlessly. The realization of how stupid she had been was bitter. She had walked deliberately into the snare that had been laid for her credulous feet. The appearance of the black sedan in front of her on the road leading into Atlanta was no accident. The man and woman in it must have been following her all day. They knew her destination. When she turned off 29 on the blue road, they had been at her heels. All they had to do was to keep out of sight until the right moment, then cut around in front of her and decoy her here.

They had the money now, of course. She had left the brown paper package crammed with currency under her polo coat in her unlocked car. Was the Endicott child alive? What cruel and dreadful people there were in the world. Perhaps they had killed him.

What was that? Toni stopped moving. She listened, straining her ears, and heard it, faint and thin and muffled, but unmistakably a wail in a child's voice. There couldn't be two children in a place like this. She blinked moisture from her lashes. Little Billy Endicott was still alive. Hope sprang up in her. Perhaps now that these people had the money they would spare him—and her. The ransom was their goal. With it in their possession, there was no reason why they should resort to murder. Perhaps they would leave her and the child here in this deserted factory and disappear. The child's wailing stopped. Another sound took its place. It was the murmur of voices.

The voices were coming from the next room. Two of them were men's. One, lighter, seemed to be a woman's. Was it Celia Hanford's? If only she could hear what they were saying. Toni looked around again. A pane in the window in the inner wall was broken but the window itself was at least fifteen feet from the floor. The shelves ran up to a height of six feet. If she could get up to the top shelf, the board was wide enough to stand on, while she wouldn't be able to see, she might be able to gather something of what was going on.

She moved quickly over to the corner in which the empty barrels were. Grasping the nearest, she tipped it over and lowered it to the floor. It was heavy and she had to hold it back so that it didn't hit the cement floor with a crash. When it was on its side she rolled it across to the crude shelves. Getting it empty side down was another strain on her muscles. When she had it in place, she carried over the wooden box and mounted her precarious ladder. Scrambling from the barrel to the shelf top was an acrobatic feat that very nearly defeated her, but urgency drove her on and she finally found herself standing erect on top of the shelf. She stilled her own rapid breathing and strained her ears.

SHE could hear distinctly now. It took time for her to unravel the voices. There were three of them. She had no trouble with Mrs. Hanford's, and there were two men with her. One voice was deep and easy, the voice of a man you might encounter anywhere. It belonged to a man called Doc. The other voice was blurred, gruff. The owner was addressed as Joe. There was an argument going on. Celia Hanford was angry at the two men. She said, and there was a shrill edge to her syllables that had been entirely absent when she was Toni's passenger, "It was all your fault, Doc, yours and Joe's. You bungled it in the beginning, up there in Stoningham in Delaware. You knew the Thorne girl had our car with the money in it. You were both damn fools. We wouldn't be in this mess if you'd been on your toes—as you should have been."

"Look," Joe said with a whine. "What were we to do? That bartender was yelling his head off and a crowd began to gather. There was nothing for Doc and me to do but beat it. How did you want us to play it? Hang around and risk a pinch then and there?"

Celia Hanford began to rail at him. Doc intervened. "Be reasonable, Celia," he said mildly. "Joe and I did all we could all along the line without tipping our hand. And may I remark, my dear, that you weren't so efficient with your own little endeavor when you were in the car with Miss Thorne."

Celia Hanford said tartly, "I did what I

could on that side road but the fool wouldn't stop—and my quick thinking let you make the car switch at the Griswold. Not that it did us much good. As for the attempt to get the money at the cabin the Thorne girl took later on that night, that was a pretty clumsy job you pulled, Joe. You loused that up completely. You'd never have gotten the car back at all if I hadn't led Whitney a chase to draw him off."

Doc chuckled. "It was Miss Thorne who did our work for us with Mr. Whitney today."

"What do you mean?" Joe asked.

"Well, Whitney was following her all morning. We caught up with them at the place where the girl had lunch. When she ditched Whitney, after she left him stranded there, before Celia and I left, we took steps. We made sure that Mr. Whitney had two flat tires so that he would be out of the running permanently."

"Who is this guy Whitney, anyhow?" Joe demanded. "I never did understand that. What's he sticking his nose in for?"

"Clark Whitney," Doc answered, "is a friend of the Endicotts. He was military intelligence during the war. The Endicotts, wisely, were afraid to go to the police about paying the money. They brought him in instead."

Toni felt as though she were going to faint. She staggered, had to clutch at the edge of one of the rusty iron pipes to keep from crashing to the floor. Clark Whitney innocent of any part in the kidnapping—not only innocent but fighting these dreadful people throughout. . . . How wildly mistaken she had been, how terribly mistaken. She had not only thwarted him by leaving him stranded while she took the other route earlier that day, she had cut herself off, cut the Endicott child off, from all hope of rescue. She closed her eyes, leaned her head back against the wall. It was too late for regrets now. What were these people going to do?

She wasn't left long in doubt. The argument in the next room was growing louder. At first there was a distinct difference of opinion. Doc was the spokesman for himself and Joe. With her heart in her throat, Toni listened to him plead for their lives, hers and the child's, for his own selfish reasons, a matter of policy.

"My idea," Doc said, "is to take the kid and the Thorne girl out on a back road somewhere and turn them loose. We've got the money. You know what murder in a snatch case is. They'll never let up. If we do turn the kid and the girl loose, we can push on down to Mexico and be in the clear."

But Celia Hanford would have none of it. "That's fine, Doc," she said with thin ferocity, "but there's a little something you forgot. That kid's five years old. I took care of him for ten days while you people were fooling around up north. Don't you suppose he'd know me again? As for the Thorne girl, I was with her in her car. Do you think I'm going to risk the chair by having her identify me? Not on your life. She's got to be knocked off. I might take a chance on the kid, but the girl has got to get it. And while we're about it we might as well make a clean sweep of both of them."

Toni's breathing stopped. Sweat was pouring down her face. It trickled into her mouth and she licked it away. It had a salty taste. In the next room the dreadful voices went on and on. Joe was being won over. Doc agreed with reluctance, grumblingly, "What about the brain boy, and Harry and Dutch?" Celia Hanford's answer to that was, "I'm not putting my neck in a noose for anyone. They can like it or lump it." A door opened somewhere and a third man entered the next room. They greeted him, told him they had the money and Toni gathered from what the newcomer said that he was the one who had been driving the Chevrolet she had appropriated by mistake. He said, "If you guys say knock 'em off, I say it's OK by me. I'm interested in the dough and getting the hell out of here. Let's go."

THERE was movement on the other side of the wall. Toni realized distantly that she mustn't be found where she was. Not that there was any hope, but the more they thought she knew, the shorter the time would be. She climbed stiffly down from her perch, returned the barrel to its place, sat down on the box and buried her face in her hands. They were going to kill her and they were going to kill the poor little boy.

The word kill kept coming back to her meaninglessly from the echoing cavern that

was her mind. Neither she nor the child had ever really lived, she thought dispassionately. If time had been given her she would have broken her engagement with William as gently as possible. It was only protection she had sought from William—which wasn't fair. But that was all over now. If only there was something she could do for the child. She knew there was nothing she could do.

There were footsteps in the hall outside. Toni braced herself, got up slowly. It was coming now. What would it be—a bullet, a knife thrust, a rope around her neck? The key was inserted in the door. The lock clicked back. The knob started to turn and stopped.

There was a shout somewhere and more footsteps, a lot of them, loud running footsteps pounding hard on wood. The huge building, so silent before, reverberated with cries and noise and confusion. Toni ran to the door. She dragged it open. She looked out into the long narrow corridor. Off to her left, policemen choked it in a compact mass. They were struggling to and fro. A man's arm was flung up, a woman screamed. The woman was Celia Hanford. Toni leaned weakly back against the door and turned her head the other way. She started erect with a glad cry. William had led the rescue. William had saved her and the child. He was standing in the doorway leading to the street, blinking a little and resting a hand against the wall. He hadn't yet seen her.

"William," Toni called, "William," ran toward him.

She had almost reached him, was almost in his outstretched arms, when a gun cracked somewhere and before her stricken eyes William folded gently and fell forward.

VIII

THE September afternoon was cool, fresh. Toni went on listening to Clark Whitney's voice in the solarium on the second floor of the hospital on the outskirts of Atlanta. She was lying back in a bamboo chair, slim length wrapped in a white negligee. It was the second day she had been up. The bullet that had killed William on that dreadful night almost three weeks ago, had cut a gash in her shoulder as it flew past undeflected. It wasn't the surface wound that had kept her in bed for so long. It was shock.

Clark Whitney wasn't looking at her. He was standing at one of the long windows looking down into the garden below, tall and straight, his skin more deeply tanned than ever by the southern sun, his hair fairer. He was leaving Atlanta that afternoon, had come to say goodby.

"You know it all now," he said in a subdued tone. "I had to lie to you and deceive you. I was pretty well convinced that you weren't mixed up personally in Billy Endicott's kidnapping, but I couldn't afford to take a chance. You drove the car in which Grace Ordin had placed the ransom money that had been demanded, away from the Club in Eastfield. You were honestly mistaken, but how was I to know that? I was delegated by the Endicott family to follow the ransom money and make sure that it got to its destination and that in return little Billy would be handed over."

He was right. He couldn't know that she wasn't mixed up in the crime, Toni thought, her lashes dark rims of shadow on her pale cheeks. That was one of the bitterest blows of all, that William had involved her. The evidence the police had produced was eaten into her brain with acid. William, the man she trusted, whose ring she had worn, whom she went south to marry, had planned the Endicott kidnapping from beginning to end.

She saw the picture clearly enough now, the police had made it plain to her. William had taken the first downward step during the war, when to bulwark his shaky finances he had engaged in black market activities which had brought him in contact with the old Vesey gang working in Atlanta. His position and background had kept him safe. He never actively participated in the crimes he planned, spade work was done by others.

As far as the Endicott kidnapping was concerned, it had attracted a great deal of public attention, the heat was on, and it was finally decided that Toni should be used to carry the ransom money south, without knowing that she did so. "But," she had protested to the men, the District Attorney and the Inspector who had interviewed her, "how did they know I'd get into the wrong car by chance?"

The Inspector said, "There was no chance

about it. Your own car was removed up there at the Club in Eastfield and the other put in its place. They bought or stole, we haven't traced that yet, another Chevrolet as like yours as two peas in a pod. Miss Grace Ordin placed the money in the glove compartment and then you got in and drove off with it. The original plan was that you were to drive the money and that when you met Grant here in Atlanta, the cars were to be switched."

Toni couldn't understand it at first. She said, "But why two cars? Why didn't they just put the money in my car and not bother about getting a second one?"

THE District Attorney had made it plain. "You were coming south to marry Grant. If the money had been put into your own car, don't forget you were well known in Eastfield, the license number would have been a direct lead to the criminals. In addition, in case anything happened on the way down, Grant wanted you, and everyone else, to think exactly what you did think, that you had taken the wrong car by mistake. He couldn't afford the slightest breath of suspicion. William Kleinert, Doc, talked, a little. Grant was sure you wouldn't notice the slight differences in the license numbers, or the money in the glove compartment."

That Toni did understand. William had often smilingly chided her and Frank on the condition of the glove compartment in the Buick, crammed with tools, old gloves, maps and forgotten packages of cigarettes. They never used it. As for the license plate, her bad memory for numbers was a family joke.

It was Clark Whitney's presence on the road that had thrown a monkey wrench into the machinery. The gang knew he was working for the Endicotts. Hurried readjustments were necessary. They had done what they could—with the results she knew.

One grain of comfort had been left to Toni. The little Endicott boy was safe. William hadn't intended that either she or the child should come to any harm. If all had gone well she would never have known who or what he was. Things hadn't gone well. She hadn't met William in Atlanta. The other members of the gang had tried, and failed, to get in touch with him during the last hours. When she didn't meet William, he had hurried to the abandaned factory to see what was going on. Clark Whitney and the police had already taken over. The reason William had died was that he was drawing a gun on the policeman behind her as she ran toward him.

The appearance of Clark Whitney on the scene was one of the points on which Toni was not clear. "How," she said to the tall man standing at the window, burning scarlet flooding her checks, "did you—find us when—when I drove off and left you on the veranda of that place after lunch that day? They did something to your tires, didn't they?"

"Oh, that," Whitney shrugged. "I commandeered another car. It wouldn't have done me the slightest bit of good, only that I caught sight of one of those thugs driving a Chevvy on the road ahead of me. It was the Chevvy you had driven away from the Club in Eastfield. He led me straight to the hideout. A telephone call for the police," he shrugged again, "and that was that. I hope I haven't tired you. Now," he glanced at his watch, "I'd better be off. I've got to pick up my bags at the hotel. I'm catching a plane north. You'll be going home soon yourself, won't you?"

Home, Toni thought, gazing out at massed pecan trees against a colorless sky, what was home? Frank was gone and might not be back for years—

Standing above her Clark Whitney extended his hand. It was a lean brown hand, long fingered and strong. Toni put her own fragile white one into it. Their eyes met and clung.

"Is my luck in, Toni?" he said gently. "Is it? You know, you must know, how I've felt about you since the first moment I saw you up there at the Club in Eastfield."

Toni knew how she felt about him. She had known also, instinctively, from that first moment, had been afraid to look at her knowledge. Now the fear was gone. It had been magically swept away. Radiance flooded her. She raised her arms. Clark Whitney bent.

A stout woman in a flowered kimona carrying a magazine looked into the solarium at the man and the girl near the windows, smiled, and tiptoed away.

MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell

Mind Over Body

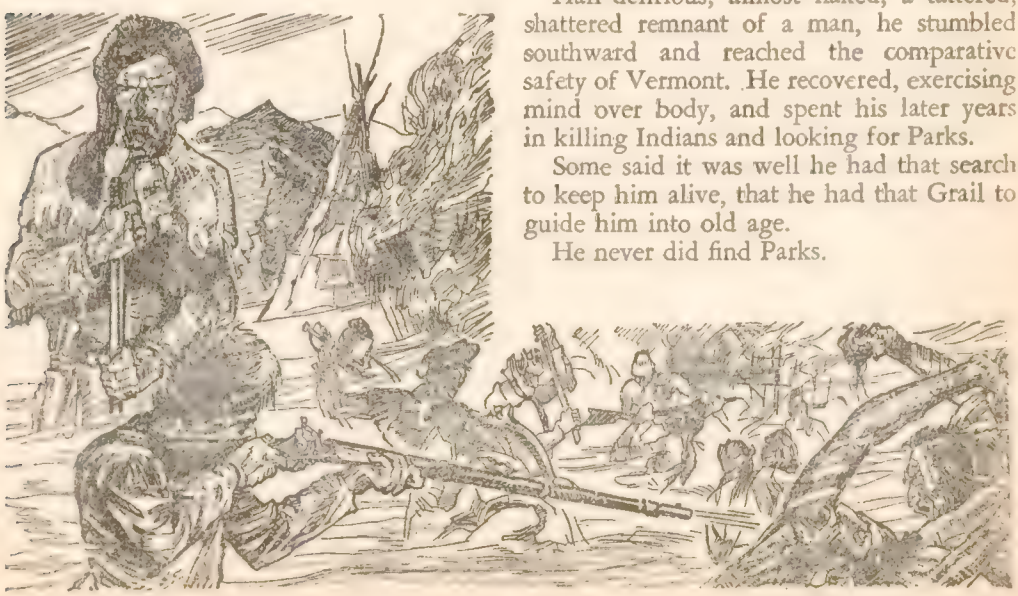
THREE years before one G. Washington established the Military Order of the Purple Heart, one William Harris won the right to wear it plus three clusters, which unfortunately for Harris, were not authorized until several wars later. But had he known of such a medal, he doubtless would have spurned it, as his one ambition in life was to catch a man named Parks, who caused his troubles; and beyond catching Parks, nothing else was important. Harris himself said it was mind over body, and his hatred of Parks kept him alive. Harris was captured by Carleton's raiders as they retired toward Canada by Lake George. In the brisk beginning of winter, he was herded onto an island in the St. Lawrence and left to freeze. Harris escaped and groped through sleet-petrified woods and paused, finally, to light a fire. Parks, a Tory, found him and turned Indians loose on him, and Parks laid his head open with an axe. Stripped of his scant clothing, he was left for dead.

Harris came to, pneumoniac and stiff, and discovered an Indian hatchet wound in addition to Parks' blow; and his arm had been snapped like a stick and there was a bayonet slash in his breastbone.

Half-delirious, almost naked, a tattered, shattered remnant of a man, he stumbled southward and reached the comparative safety of Vermont. He recovered, exercising mind over body, and spent his later years in killing Indians and looking for Parks.

Some said it was well he had that search to keep him alive, that he had that Grail to guide him into old age.

He never did find Parks.



Mutiny On The "Albatross"

By FRED LANE

Forecastle and Mess Talk Was No Longer Dominated by Women and Grog; Everyone Was Discussing How Beef Should Be Cooked

IT HAD been a long, sweltering run from Manila, and San Francisco's cool, gray fog felt mighty good when I stepped from the wharfshed to the Embarcadero. It was only five o'clock but I started thinking about shore chow. That's what the fog does to a man and maybe that's why Frisco is famous for restaurants such as Henry's Grill.

Henry was a celebrity, though, even before he opened his cafe, having been seacook on the old *Albatross* when she piled up. Now, his place is practically a landmark and it looks like Henry—and Newt, his amiable steer—will take their place in local history.

My course to Henry's took me past Kelly's place which is craftily situated so as to tempt mariners bound uptown. As I hesitated, something that felt like the Ferry Building landed on my back and a raspy bellow rang out, "McClanahan! Me old shipmate!"

It was Amos Skaggs, erstwhile skipper of the *Albatross*. He pushed his battered officers' cap back from his bulging forehead and, placing a hairy paw on my shoulder, pushed me through Kelly's swinging doors, saying, "Gotta have a snort with me old chief mate."

"Have one on me," I said, although I don't know why. Unless it is simply that, when ashore, sailors let bygones be bygones. Without a doubt, Skaggs had been the meanest, pinch-belly skipper to ever pound a ship's bridge.

"That I'll do," Skaggs said quickly.

"Double rye an' beer chaser. For old-times' sake." He sighed deeply and a morose expression came over his ruby-colored face. "Y'know, I ain't a skipper no more, Mac." He downed his grog like a seagull swallowing a sardine. "I'm third mate on a dinky, starvation lumber pot." He buried his bulbous nose in a red bandanna and snuffled.

Before I had finished my beer, Skaggs had downed a second drink and was signalling for another; also, on me. I told him I had to get along. Foolishly, I mentioned that I was bound for Henry's.

"Now, that's real decent of you," he said. "How'd you guess I been pinin' for a first-class meal? Why, I'd give a dollar for one of Henry's specials what he used to dish up aboard the *Albatross*. If I had a dollar, that is. Well, let's go."

So, I had him in tow when Henry greeted me with a cheery smile. He gulped a little when he saw Skaggs, but held his grin in place.

He was going to let bygones be bygones, too.

Amos Skaggs beamed as he always did when he was getting something for free. "I never knowed what good chow was, Henry, till you signed on the *Albatross*. That's what I tell everybody up an' down the Coast. I must of give you a thous' dollars worth of advertisin' the last couple of years."

Skaggs was trying to build himself up for some future meals on the house, but little Henry was too pleased to realize that. His pale blue eyes sparkled and his collie-dog grin widened.

"By the way, Henry," I said, "how's Newt?"

"Oh, he's just fine, Mister McClanahan. I have him boarded out in a little pasture in Marin County where he can watch the ships go by."

I reached for a bill and handed it over to Henry, saying, "This is for Newt—from me. Buy him something special in the way of hay. I looked over at Captain Skaggs but he was tying his shoe lace.

Henry, carefully putting the bill in his wallet, said, "I'll tell Newt it's from you. He's such a remarkable animal. You know, I do believe that he understands every word I say."

When I ordered a steak, Skaggs boomed, "Henry, I'll leave it up to you. One of your specials, eh?"

After Henry trotted off, a waiter arrived with plates of salami, radishes, and green onions. Skaggs popped a half-dozen radishes in his mouth and sighed. "Mac," he said, "after what I been through on that lumber-pot, eatin' here will be like bein' in Fiddler's Green. Life's crool an' unfair, Mac. Take Henry, now. A dumb little runt what's lucky. Gets his own spot what's famous overnight—on account of the *Albatross*. An' me—a God-fearin', hard-working mariner, losin' me ship—an' me ticket, too. 'Tain't right, Mac."

REMEMBERING the *Albatross*, I wondered about that. Skaggs had signed Henry on as a cook for the South American voyage because he couldn't get anyone else. Professional sea-cooks gave the *Albatross* a wide berth, knowing the ship for what she was—a sea-going sundowner, wandering around the world, seeking such handouts of cargo as were scorned by other craft. Her holds reeked with the smells of Texas hides, Peruvian guano, and copra from the Carolines. She crawled with cockroaches. Her engines were haywired together and only an ancient coat of paint kept her rusty hull from falling apart. Being a small ship with a crew numbering less than fifty, she wasn't required to carry a radio—and so Skaggs had none. Squeezing past the port authorities without replacing worn gear was a game into which Skaggs put his heart, since it saved him money. He also attended to the buying of all stores and, as a result, even the seagulls spurned her wake.

Only waterfront riffraff would sign on the *Albatross*—or a green young mate with a brand new ticket, like me; or someone who didn't know her reputation, like Henry. He'd never been in a ship's galley before.

That first meal aboard with Henry in the galley, is something to remember. There was even a menu! The chief engineer was staring at Henry's neat handwriting when Skaggs lumbered into the saloon. Taking his place at the head of the table, the captain bellowed, enveloping us in an alcoholic mist, "Where in hell's that messboy?"

Pinky exploded from the pantry and, laying a menu in front of the skipper, said

nervously, "Bill o' fare, sir. Tells what the cook's got for supper."

"Does, eh?" Skaggs snarled. His bloodshot eyes ran down the column. We could hear his breathing get louder and could see his thick neck get redder by the second. "Split pea poorey," he mumbled, "an' beef saw-tee, curry sauce, potatoes O'Brien—" He brought his fist down on the table and roared, "Bring me meat an' spuds, an' tell that cook he ain't on no yacht."

Pinky vanished and Skaggs kept muttering under his breath. When the messboy returned, he brought a dish, the likes of which the old *Albatross'* mess had never seen. The salt beef had been sliced into even pieces and artistically arranged. It was lightly covered with a creamy sauce and a neat dome of green-flecked potatoes rose nobly at one side.

The chief, deep in his soup, was struggling to keep a straight face. So was I. For a moment, Skaggs stared at his plate, then shouted, "Pinky!"

Pinky slithered in and the skipper howled, "Get that cook in here."

Henry entered, smiling, obviously expecting a compliment. He was wearing a snowy white chef's hat with his name embroidered on the front in red thread.

Skaggs eyed him savagely. "See here, cooky, just where'd these fancy goo-gaws come from—this here parsley and sauce?"

"Why, I bought them before we left, sir," Henry said brightly. "I always carry my own condiments and pick up a few extras so as to start my job off right. Of course, we'll have to purchase more at our next stop. I've quite a list, sir, since I have observed that the stores are decidedly lacking in variety. And I do so wish to please the crew—"

"Crew! You servin' this fancy goulash to the fo'c'sle an' black gang?"

"Certainly, sir," Henry said.

Skaggs got up and shook his big fist under Henry's nose. "You'll serve plain chow an' not give the crew ideas about grub. An' remember this—I ain't payin' for those extrys you got. Now, get back to your pots an' from now on, serve salt horse an' spuds one day, an' lobscouse the next."

Henry said quietly, "I can't do that, sir."

"Can't do what?"

"Sir, the provisions are truly inferior. They require expert handling with certain sauces and condiments to make them palatable. If you wish plain-cooked food, you must stop at the nearest port and purchase some first-quality stores—"

Skaggs bared his yellow teeth. "We ain't buyin' nothin'. Now, get out. An' don't let me see another plateful of this kind of slumgullion again."

HENRY stood his ground. He was a stubborn little lubber, and game, too. His blue eyes held a steely glitter when he said, "Slumgullion? That is an insult, sir. Are you aware that I have won awards for my culinary ability?" He took a deep breath and then went on, "I wish to tender my resignation."

Skaggs' jaws worked spasmodically. He looked around with a furious helplessness. "He—he wants to resign!"

"Yes. I have no alternative. Kindly turn this vessel around and I will get off as soon as we reach port. Even if I could forgive the insult, I would not remain to prostitute my art."

With a bellow, Skaggs reached for the plate of sauteed meat and brought it down on Henry's head. "You're signed on right an' proper, an' you'll do like I say. Meat an' spuds, an' lobscouse."

Dripping meat and sauce, Henry stood unyielding. "I refuse," he said icily.

Skaggs jerked Henry forward, shoving him at me. "Mutiny, by God. Mutiny! Mr. McClanahan, put this man in irons."

With Henry in the paint locker, Pinky was installed as cook. I believe Pinky had a theory that if a little salt was good, lots was better. As for his coffee, we could have run the engines on it. After a few meals, Skaggs looked at me and belched. He said, "Tell Henry if hell dish up plain grub, I'll let him out."

But as I have said, Henry was stubborn. "I'm sorry, Mr. McClanahan, but I am a man with principles. I have devoted years to my art. When I retired from the hardware business, I became president of the Western Chefs. The only bachelor, by the way, ever to attain that distinguished position. Most of the officers, I have reason to suspect, were assisted by their wives. I have won many awards and have been held in high esteem by my fellow amateurs. They

all agreed that I should open an exclusive restaurant for discriminating gourmets and that is now my ambition. Why, I took this position for the same reason I was recently a chuck-wagon cook on a cattle ranch—to add to my knowledge of masculine appetites."

"I understand, Henry. But," I argued, "it'd be very easy to do what the skipper wants. Boiled meat and spuds. Lobscouse—"

His eyes flickered a bit with interest. "Just what is lobscouse, anyway, Mr. McClanahan?"

"Just hash made out of ground meat, hardbread, onions, or spuds. Leftovers. It's tiresome eating, but anybody can make it."

He looked at me reproachfully. "Anybody can whitewash a barn, but would you expect a Rembrandt to do it? I prefer to remain locked up."

After three days, the crew was griping ominously at Pinky's awful messes and was on the verge of mutiny. The skipper, knowing the kind of hard characters who'd signed on the *Albatross,* was getting worried. He growled at me:

"Get him back in the galley, Mr. McClanahan." Then, he let go a string of oaths. "I'll kick him off when we hit Panama an' find me another potslinger."

I knew he wouldn't though. According to law, Skaggs would have to pay Henry's passage home and it wasn't in him to part with cash.

WE ATE Henry specials as we steamed south: dishes garnished with original sauces along with a variety of soups and puddings. All of them were, of course, limited in quality because of the tenth-rate larder. But still, they weren't bad, at all. When we stopped at Central and South American ports to discharge or take on cargo, Henry would go ashore and buy fresh fruits and vegetables—paid for by himself. Captain Skaggs refused to disgorge a penny.

I complimented Henry frequently but he continued to look woeful. "You're very kind, Mr. McClanahan, but I'm not succeeding. You realize that an artist thrives on applause and, except from you, I've had none. Just silence—as devastating as a mute audience to a fine actor."

"You don't know sailors," I explained. "They always grouse. The fact that they don't complain is the greatest acclaim you can expect aboard ship."

He didn't believe me. "If only I had the proper materials to work with," he said moodily. "I'm tempted to dip still further into my savings, even though I need every cent to establish my restaurant." He walked off, a thoughtful look in his eyes.

He went ashore at Valparaiso and introduced himself to a Chileno amateur chefs' society with whose members he had corresponded, exchanging recipes. When he returned, he was breathless with excitement. "Mr. McClanahan! What do you think our large-hearted Latin-American cousins have done? When I asked their assistance in shopping, explaining my situation—that we'd spend Thanksgiving Day at sea—why, they presented me with a steer!"

We hoisted the steer aboard with a winch and I had Chips make a corral forward of the poop. We lashed down the hay and stuff the Chilenos had donated and spread a tarp over it.

"Funny about steers," Chips remarked. "They ain't a he an' they ain't a she. What would you call 'em?"

"Neutral," the bosun said. "That's what steers is."

"Neutral, eh?" Then Chips leaped aside as the steer knocked loose a two-by-four, trying to get at the hay. "Easy, Newt," he said.

Newt was mostly brown with patches of white on his sides. He had long, curved horns but, even so, he didn't look at all fierce. He actually had a nice, homey look about him.

Skaggs, of course, admired him enthusiastically. Newt was for free. "Tell Henry if he needs any extrys, like onions, maybe,

to serve with Newt, I'll go as high as a couple of bucks."

Newt was scheduled to be carved up into steaks and roasts somewhere off the Mexican coast, homeward bound. "We ought to be off Cape San Lucas on Thanksgiving Day," Captain Skaggs said. "An' fee-lay minion beats turkey any time."

Newt was a good sailor. He fattened as we worked north. Henry watched over him, provided an awning and sloshed cooling buckets of water over him in the heat of the day.

"I've taken quite a liking to Newt," he confessed one day off Honduras. "He's so gentle and uncomplaining. Quite a contrast to some human beings, isn't he?"

The skipper and the crew were interested in Newt, also. Each day, the steer was inspected by all hands, and there was constant speculation as to his weight and potential tenderness. Daily, Chips checked Newt's girth with his tape measure and reported his findings. But, you could hardly blame them. After all, salt horse is salt horse, even the way Henry disguised it. However, we were spared lobscouse. Henry positively refused to make the stuff.

AS WE neared the Cape, fo'c'sle and messroom talk was no longer dominated by the usual subjects—women and grog. Various methods of preparing beef were discussed; memories of luscious steaks were revived. The steak smothered-in-onion school almost came to blows with the steak and French-fry advocates. The *Albatross* drooled.

We were running north of San Salvador the day before Newt was to go off the hoof. I was on the bridge when the skipper came topside and I said I didn't like the look of the sky.

Skaggs said, "I've ordered that able seaman, name of Hatch, to do the job on Newt in the mornin'. Hatch says he used to work in a slaughterhouse, an'—"

"Captain," I persisted, "it looks like we might get a blow and we're running pretty close to the coast. I think—"

"I do the thinkin' for the ship," Skaggs snarled. "You want we should put out to sea an' burn more fuel? Oil costs money."

When I went below, I stopped at the pantry for coffee and found Henry disconsolately watching some cockroaches cavorting on the breadboard.

"Don't look so glum," I said. "It won't be long now before you'll be getting more compliments than the corpse at an Irish wake."

"Mr. McClanahan," he said miserably, "I can't do it."

"Can't do what?"

"Can't let Newt be murdered."

"But, it isn't murder, Henry. It's—" I hesitated. "I thought you told me you were a chuck-wagon cook, once. On a cattle spread you must've seen lots of animals bumped off—"

"I did not. I wouldn't watch," he said. "I merely handled raw materials. Anyway, with Newt, it's different."

"Well, there's nothing much you can do about it."

"Yes, there is. He's mine. He's cost the ship nothing but a little deck space and I'll pay for that, if Captain Skaggs insists."

"He will—if Newt stays alive. But Henry, the crew's kind of set on some beef and if they don't get it, there might be trouble. You'd better give this a lot of thought."

"I have." Henry stood up and folded his arms.

DAWN broke to reveal a flat, sullen sea and a crimson sky. The coast stood out sharp and clear and the glass was erratic. It was the kind of weather that makes a sailor feel that something is about to happen, and it usually does.

After breakfast, I heard angry shouting and I ran aft to where several seamen were clustered about Newt's corral. Hatch was standing by with a sledgehammer, glaring at Henry who stood between him and the steer.

"Grab the little runt!" someone yelled. "I'll hold him while Hatch does the job."

As they started for Henry, I ordered them to stand back. "It's his steer. Go about your duties, all of you, or you'll be logged."

"But the skipper ordered Hatch to knock Newt off—" Chips protested.

"We'll take the matter up with him when he gets up," I said. That would be about noon, since Skaggs had taken on a sufficient cargo the night before to keep him in his bunk half the day.

They didn't like it. They were muttering when they went forward. I watched them for a while and then turned to try to reason with Henry. But he had disappeared. All I saw was a large brown and white stern wedging into the 'midships housing alley. Before I could do anything, Henry had locked himself and Newt inside his dinky cabin.

At two bells, Skaggs was still snoring. By that time, the sky had a nasty overcast. Weather was brewing, all right. And mutiny was brewing, too. Pinky had to cook lunch and that didn't help things, either.

An hour later, the southwest horizon was a sooty black and, below it, where the sky met the sea, was a white line like a row of teeth. "When that squall hits," I told the second mate, "keep her bow into the sea. I'm going below—"

I pounded on the skipper's door again and I heard him snort irritably. Then, a loud clamoring broke out aft. I started running.

Henry's door had been battered down by the time I arrived, and he was being dragged to the deck. Some of the seamen were wrestling with Newt, trying to get him out of the cabin.

"Stand clear, all of you" I yelled, but they paid no attention. I knocked one man down and Newt decided to come out. Several of us were bowled over.

I got to my feet just as Hatch raised the sledge for a swing at Newt's skull. I lunged, bringing up a long right. Hatch went down. "Get to work, all of you," I shouted. "The ship's in danger. Secure all gear and hatches. Look after ventilators. See to the boat lashings—"

The *Albatross* trembled as the squall struck and, frightened, the crew ran to their duties. When I reached the bridge, Skaggs was standing by the wheelhouse, blinking blearily. "Why in hell didn't you call me—" He stopped as the *Albatross* lurched.

The ship lifted and plunged. The seas smashed down on her deck. One lifeboat was swept clear, another dangled in its falls. It was almost as dark as night and the screaming southwester drove a lashing rain before it. It was one of those nasty black squalls you sometimes get in those waters.

Suddenly, the helmsman yelled, "She don't answer the wheel, sir!"

"Rudder's gone," roared the skipper. "Rig a jury, mister."

There wasn't time for that. But we managed to get a hawser over the stern and bring her up to the wind again. We might have held our own except that the old engines began to falter. Captain Skaggs bellowed into the engine-room speaking tube: "What in hell's wrong, now? Get up more steam, Chief, or we'll pile up." He turned and barked at me, "Stand by to let go the anchors, mister. We might need 'em."

We did. The haywired engines gave up the struggle and we were driven relentlessly toward the coast. The anchors rattled down and, for a little while, I thought they would hold. But, like everything else on the old *Albatross,* the gear was ancient and rusty. The cables parted. We were flung toward shore again.

That coast was certainly no place to beach a ship, even in mild weather. It couldn't have been worse. There was a snag-toothed reef, spreading north and south as far as we could see. We hit, stern on, and the *Albatross* shuddered. Then, the bow swung around and smashed hard. She hung there, quivering as each succeeding sea belted her unmercifully. She wouldn't last long. No ship could take that kind of beating.

I saw Skaggs staring wild-eyed at our remaining boats and I knew what he was thinking, No small boat could live in that turbulent water. I turned from him and saw the men staring hopefully toward the shore. It was close. Hardly more than a cable's length distant. We could see people on the beach.

There was a chance for us! If we could shoot a line to shore, we could bend on a whip and hawser which the beach folks

could make fast to one of the high, rocky ledges. With luck, and and an improvised breeches buoy, we might get ashore, one by one, before the *Albatross* broke up.

Skaggs had figured it out that way, too. "We better get a line ashore with the deck gun. Stand by the cannon," he ordered.

Well, it was the same with the cannon as it was with the rest of the *Albatross'* gear. The powder was old and damp. There was a weak sputter when the cord was pulled. The projectile fell dully to the deck.

I ran my tongue over my lips. So, that was that. The *Albatross* would break up and if a single one of us reached the beach alive, it'd be a miracle.

Someone tugged at my sleeve. "Mr. McClanahan—" It was Henry. "I—" he was shouting over the roar of the wind, "I have an idea. When I was chuck-wagon cook, I once saw some steers ford a stream during a flash flood. I daresay it's a matter of self-preservation and maybe—"

"I get it!" I yelled. "Come on, Henry. Where's Newt?"

The skipper didn't say a word. I got the crew aft and we rigged a sling. There was just enough steam left to work a winch. Newt came willingly enough. "Just like," Henry said, "he knows what is expected of him."

The sling was passed over Newt's belly and over the cargo hook. It wasn't easy, with the *Albatross* lurching, but somehow, we got it done. A light line was bent to his big horns as Henry put an arm around the steer's neck and whispered what might have been words of encouragement.

Then, the winch rattled and Newt was hoisted clear of the teetering deck. The boom swung out. "Lower." Slowly, Newt descended toward the creamy sea. He turned and looked at us briefly and then his legs began to churn as he hit the water. The hooks slackened and the ropes worked free. Newt started swimming toward shore.

Sometimes, we couldn't even see him in the smother and only the line paying out told us that he was making headway. When he neared a sharp, jutting rock, all hands yelled, "Look out, Newt!" Henry claimed it was our warning shout which Newt understood that enabled him to avoid destruction but, of course, it could have been instinct which guided him. Finally, we saw him stagger out of the breakers. The people on the beach surrounded him.

In a few moments, they were hauling on the line to which we had bent a larger whipline, tailblock, and suitable gear. When the block was made fast to a pinnacle of rock ashore, we secured our end to the mainmast through another block, bent on a heavy hawser and signalled them to haul away. With the hawser taut and the breeches buoy suspended to a traveling block, the business of getting the men ashore began. One by one they went, over the boiling sea. Newt had saved our lives.

Later, when I proposed a collection for Newt so that he'd have plenty of hay, every man jack of the crew chipped in generously. Even Captain Skaggs.

"Henry," the skipper said, "I'll donate what I could've charged you for freight on Newt. That way, you won't owe me a single penny, see?"

AMOS SKAGGS stuffed his mouth with salami and said, "Yes, sir. Life's crool an' unjust. Take Henry, now. He just wouldn't cook lobscouse aboard the *Albatross*. But, on this lumber-pot I'm on, the blinkin' cook don't cook nothin' else but. Lobscouse, mornin', noon, an' night. An' I got to eat it or starve."

Henry's waiter came in and placed a sizzling steak in front of me. It was magnificent. Before Amos Skaggs, he laid a dish with a silver cover over it. Henry came over to our table, beaming, just as Skaggs lifted the cover. "I—" He stopped and stared. He looked at me, then at Henry. A terrific blast of profanity rang out. Then, "Lobscouse! Stinkin' lobscouse!" he howled. "You damned little pot-slinger!" He reached for the plate but Henry beat him to it.

"Pot-slinger!" Henry was white with fury. I didn't blame him. It must have been an ordeal for him to cook lobscouse—like Rembrandt having to whitewash a barn. Yet, he'd done it for Skaggs. He had let bygones be bygones, as sailors do when ashore.

The plate of lobscouse was balanced expertly in his hand. Henry is stubborn, like I've said. He really wanted Skaggs to have that lobscouse. And, Skaggs got it, all right. All at once. Right in the face.

The Confirmed Spelunker Is the Explorer of the Last Frontiers of the World—the Underworld

Convict Cave

By CLAY PERRY

WE THREE cave explorers, spelunkers for short, speleologists if you want to be scientific, made for the great cavern entrance well equipped with ropes, carbide lamps on tin hats, canteen of water, spare carbide, cameras, flash bulbs, rough, warm clothing, though it was a muggy August day. It would be cold inside, about 50 degrees, Fahrenheit.

Our mission was not only to explore the cavern but to try to discover whether the two escaped convicts from the road gang down the mountain had actually entered it. The authorities declared that the pair had been traced right to the entrance, after their disappearance in the woods, where they had been allowed to go, as trusties, after drinking water at a spring. None of the guards, not even the sheriff himself, wanted to go down in there. They were not interested in cave crawling; they all had an instant attack of claustrophobia, the fear of dark, tight places. Maybe, also, a justified fear of getting lost in the prodigous depths and rambling passages of what had already begun to be called Convict Cave.

I got my information about the time of the convicts' escape, second hand, and I learned later that I had got it wrong. I wondered why Marks, who answered to the monicker of "Madman" Marks for his daring in cavern work, refused to accept a pistol from the sheriff. As I understood it, the escapees had been gone not a month before our expedition, and it was suspected by the sheriff and others that they might only have gone to the cavern entrance as a ruse, or that they had used it as a temporary hiding place, or had found an exit the other side of the Knob. Marks opined that if they had stayed in the cave they might be dead by now.

"Well, we don't keer whether they are dead or alive," the sheriff had told us, grimly. "We jest want to close the case, one way or 'tother. You shore you don't want a shootin' iron or two?"

"Naw, I got somethin' that will be more use than a pistol, if we need it," replied

Marks, and he patted his worn old knapsack, which bulged with various equipment, including some round things in heavy brown paper which he had kept a mystery from Saul and myself.

Saul and I were at the roadside, hauling things out of the car, straightening our ropes and coiling them again for carrying, and I thought I heard Marks say something to the sheriff in a low tone that sounded like, "—some bombs that'd throw a scare into a gang of train robbers."

I might have been mistaken, perhaps he said that they were "bums if they were train robbers," but I know better than to start quizzing Madman Marks. He could close up like a clam when he wanted to, and he had a mischievous habit of springing surprises on parties in caves, for the fun of it. However, I handled his knapsack gingerly when I let it down the deep, dark shaft on the end of the safety rope, to be received below by Marks, who went down first. It wouldn't be beyond him, I knew, to have some "surplus" stuff in that bag which was surplus, itself, which would explode and cover more territory than a shotgun charge. Grenades, maybe? Well, if they were, they would certainly do more than a pistol if they exploded near anyone, especially in a confined space like the cavern.

I was using a lot of imagination, I know that now, Madman Marks was one to inspire it. However, I trusted him confidently, despite his name, for he had guided us safely into and out of a dozen "wild" caverns in the mountains, big ones, some of which he had discovered.

THIS was to be our last cave crawl for the summer and Marks had saved it up, together with the wild tale of the escaped convicts who were suspected of having become cavemen. Saul and I didn't know what was coming to us, although we had heard some descriptions of Convict Cave on our underground travels through the central Alleghanies, and it had presented a challenge worth the mettle of any spelunker.

The upper entrance was a black, arched hole in a tall cliff of solid rock, limestone, it looked to be. All true caves are formed in limestone, gypsum or marble. The farmer who owned this property had erected a rude barrier across the front of the hole made up of rails, poles and rusty barbed wire, and there were traces of domestic animals having cropped close to the barrier, but none were about now, and the farmer was absent from his home far down the rough trail, but we had left word with his wife where we were going and when we expected to return, a precaution which had become habitual with us, for obvious reasons, chief among them the desire to have word sent to the nearest Grotto of the NSS, if we didn't emerge within a reasonable time, and trained, expert spelunkers would come looking for us.

There were two rude "Indian ladders" in the shaft that opened in the floor of the upper entrance, which was merely a rock shed of limited extent. They were wicked things to climb down, for they were just long, slender tree trunks, with the branches hacked off, leaving stubs about six inches long sticking up at an angle of forty-five degrees, for steps—and to stab into clothing and gear, wickedly, as one wormed his way down.

They looked to have been rather recently cut, but because of the cold, damp air of the shaft, they could have been there for months without losing their greenness. We used two ropes, one half-inch manila securely fastened to a boulder near the lip of the shaft, at one end, the other flung down to a depth of forty feet or more; then a safety rope of quarter inch size, likewise anchored, and which could be wound about a man to steady him. This would be payed out by another, on top, as he slithered down the larger rope, bending away from the spikes of those Indian ladders as much as possible.

It was left to Saul to be anchor man; it was his turn, and he was good at it, and good at getting down last, alone. I went down following Marks, who had received our impedimenta at the bottom of the second level and waited for us there, his lamp flame pointed upward to illuminate the crooked, bending tree ladders and the gray, moist walls of the shaft.

I got to the second level without tearing my clothes, though I was hung up twice on the spiky cut branches, to Marks' amusement. I kept hold of the big rope at the foot of the second ladder, feeling Saul put his weight on it, above, as he descended,

and when Saul reached the first level and we saw that he was going to make it easily, Madman Marks picked up his knapsack, his camera bag. He held them, one in each hand, instead of slinging them over his shoulders by their straps, and stepped out onto a nearly level surface of rock, a huge boulder poised at the top of a steep descent into prodigous depths of sheer blackness. Our two powerful lamp beams could not penetrate to its bottom.

Marks traversed caverns as casually, sometimes, as if he were merely taking a stroll over a rocky pasture in broad daylight.

He depended on his agility with his feet, his natural balance, his quickness and the grip of slip-proof rubber soles on his stained jungle boots, relic of his service in the Pacific islands as a Marine. Just why he preferred, now, to tote his gear in both hands I didn't know, for I wanted both my hands free, and was slinging on my packsack, when I saw the boulder Marks was poised on, start to move.

I gave a choking yell of warning, which was not necessary, for Marks felt the movement, and like a mountain goat, leaped off and to a sort of shelf at one side. This recess in the wall was just large enough for him to land and lodge there, plastered against the rock.

THE great boulder, weighing probably half a ton, kept on moving, slowly, grinding, rolling, then completely overturning and gathering momentum, it went crashing down, down with the hollow roar which the cavern echoed and made sound like an earthquake and the sound continued for what seemed minutes, but was only seconds, actually, when the big rock struck something solid, down there below, and was stopped with a sickening thud, followed by the rattle and patter of dislodged smaller rocks.

I was, frankly, shaken, and I found myself gripping the rope so hard with both hands that my fingers were numbed, while Saul, halfway down the second ladder, yelped,

"What was that, a rockfall?"

"It was a young avalanche," I replied, as I looked at Marks, who had squatted in the niche where he had leaped.

He was actually grining, his bronzed face crinkled, his bright brown eyes sparkling in the light of my lamp.

"What's so funny?" I demanded. "You might have been under that thing, and you'd be nothing but a grease spot, now."

"I was thinking," he replied, still grinning, "that we got here just at the right time. That sort of thing probably doesn't happen once in a thousand—or maybe a million years in a cave."

He started down the ground-up slope which the heavy, rolling boulder had mashed some, before I could make further comment, and as Saul joined me on the small shelf of the second level, Marks called back up, "It's okeh, now. Take it easy, though."

Believe, me, we took it easy, for the descent was amid loose rocks of all sorts and sizes, and my limited knowledge of geology told me that that rock was not limestone. It was sandstone. I remembered that Floyd Collins, the cave owner guide, died in a cavein of a sandstone cavern, down in Kentucky about three decades ago. Almost everyone living in this country remembers it, or of being told about it, for it was a nine-day horror, sensationally exploited in the newspapers. He had kicked at a loose boulder in his path and it started a rockfall that pinned him, face down, buried almost to his neck in rocks.

I didn't care to go into those memories any deeper, and I hated to let go of that rope and to start down, but Saul was sort of prodding me to give gangway, and I took my courage in my hands and eased myself down, using those gloved hands, also, to hang onto the edges of the jumble of stone while I groped with my feet.

I soon joined Madman Marks who was waiting where the passage divided. The roof arched high above, one passage, at the left led abruptly upward over a veritable little mountain of mingled fragments of rock, of packed earth, of mud, some of the sandstone in great slabs weighing tons. Some of these stood on edge or on end, slanted at sharp angles, lying loosely atop other great hunks of the coarse-grained stuff, and none of these, great or small, was cemented by flowstone as would usually be the case in a true limestone cave.

The other passage led downward, opening wide, to a huge black opening which,

from a distance of twenty or thirty feet looked like the beginning of nothing.

"Say, what kind of a hellhole is this, anyway, Marks?" I demanded.

"I reckon that's just what it is," Marks snickered. "I'll tell you. I got hold of an old geological report on this cave. It said that this used to be a true limestone cave, maybe some millions of years ago, and it committed a sort of suicide. The limestone got mostly all worn away by running water and dissolution, and the overburden of sandstone was weakened and it caved in a lot. Another few million years and maybe it'll finish the job and there won't be a cave anymore but just a big hole in the Knob, like a volcano crater."

"I just can't wait," I said. "Let's get this over with today."

I had almost forgotten about the convicts; the cavern itself looked and felt more dangerous than an army of desperate criminals.

"Come on down here to the dropoff," invited Marks. "We'll just take a look down into it. Nobody would, if he could, make a try to go down it, without a special rig."

"I heard it was measured once, about one hundred and fifty feet deep," remarked Saul.

"At least," commented Marks. "Maybe twice as far to the very bottom. We're going to try to rig up a rope trolley fastened to an A-beam and see, sometime. The Grotto, I mean."

I KNEW what that meant, for they had done such a job in two other caverns, one with a straight drop of almost two hundred feet from the entering shaft level. I had seen pictures of that sort of thing. I hadn't taken a ride, myself. I do not have claustrophobia but I do have another sort of phobia, the curious fear of high places with nothing below them, the curious, sickening feeling that seems to come from the pit of the stomach and urges one, against all his instinct of self preservation, to jump off.

I gritted my teeth and cautiously made my way down to the lip of the black hole where Marks was now squatting almost on the very edge of nothing, aiming his carbide lamp beam into the stygian gloom. Which was useless, for there was nothing to be seen, with all three of our lamps focused into it, but more depth and a cold mist rising out of it.

We didn't talk. We just squatted and stared, and I hung onto things with my hands and dug my heels in crevices.

"No, they wouldn't go down there," mused Marks. "Not unless they fell in. Let's go upstairs."

As we clambered back up, Marks kicked at something in a hollow in the rocks and out came a greenish-white *bone*. It was a big one. I gasped a bit, besides the panting I was already doing from exertion.

"The shin bone of a mule," said Marks, with a little sort of a groan. "He fell in the shaft. How in heck he ever made his way down here after that fall, I don't know. Shows just how tough a mule is. Mr. Sime told me about it, that's why he put up that fence, to keep his stock from going spelunking."

We didn't talk at all for a long time. We needed our breath for the terrific climbing up and down, for squirming through dangerous looking crevices between tilted slabs, for crawling on our hands and knees, and sometimes worming on our bellies, and besides there wasn't much to be said except harsh words so far as I was concerned, about this infernal hellhole. The way Marks led on was over those mountains of loose rock and down them, and he seemed to know exactly where he was going.

I wish I could describe that trip and what we saw as we saw it then. A rough idea can be had by saying that it was a case of clawing our way for a mile or more over what looked like a stone quarry recently blasted out with thousands of pounds of dynamite and left as it lay. If escaped convicts had made their way up and down this devil's trail, with such light as they could only have managed to smuggle away, candles, perhaps, or even small hand flashlights, they would have become lost a dozen times.

Madman Marks finally halted at the top of one of the dozen rock hills and shot his light up and across a chasm.

"Over beyond there," he said. "Nobody's ever been that we know of. I've always wanted to explore it. Right here is the last mark of anyone being in here, I think."

I hadn't been noticing, but when Marks pointed to an upended slab I saw some

rudely scratched initials and a date, and as I squinted at the scratches, I saw others. Some party had been in here forty years before—yes, one date was in the 1860's. There was soot on the rock, torch smoke.

The initials didn't mean anything to us, but the torch smoke and the dates did. Men had managed, somehow, to find their way as far as the chasm with only such flickering, poor light as was cast by the flame of burning pine knots or some other crude kind of a torch, rags soaked in coal oil, maybe.

They would certainly have been halted by the chasm—but our brilliant, spreading lights, which would cast a beam two hundred feet, showed us that there was a way to get across the chasm and that there was something beyond it unlike what we had so far seen.

IT WAS a sort of an attic shaped chamber, huge, smooth walled, dry, solid, almost level floor, safe looking, tempting to the confirmed spelunker who is an explorer of the last frontiers of earth, the underworld. And it looked, from where we sat and got our wind, like the top of this underworld, and somewhat as if it was a relic of a true cavern, too.

The silence of a cavern like this, or any cavern where there is no running water and no dripping water, is absolute. Put out your lights and you are in solitude such as man could not devise with dungeons. I know, because—

I heard what sounded like whispers up there—or was it down there in the chasm? I grasped Marks by the arm, and he evidently mistook my meaning, for he jumped up and blew out a long breath and sang out as if to a distant group of followers.

"What goes up must go down, and here we go deep down," he said, and off he started at what seemed to me like a gallop, for I was getting fatigued. I was about twice as old as Marks and Saul and this mountain climbing underground was getting my wind pretty badly. But I wanted to get into that attic room.

"I didn't hear any more whispers, if there were any, for the noise of our clambering and wheezing filled the spaces. Marks led us to one side, and began to work his way over and under the great slabs, keeping close to a solid wall where there was a sort of rude path.

"Looks like saltpeter workers must have been in here," he remarked. "Eighteen sixty-three. That was when they were digging it like mad for gunpowder for General Lee's armies."

"Saltpeter workers!" I exclaimed. "Then this sandstone caved in since that time! Holy smoke. Only a bit over one hundred years since the limestone went? Or was buried by the rockfall."

"I was only guessing," answered Marks. "They sure enough wouldn't find saltpeter here now."

He had now got his packs on his shoulders and was proceeding very slowly and cautiously, for him. Saul was close behind him, and I came trailing a few feet in the rear.

We went down to what seemed the bottom of purgatory and the ascent was like trying to climb out of hell itself, but we made it and lay flat on the dry, powdered floor of the attic room. The powder was dust from sandstone. There wasn't a track in it anywhere to be seen. The chamber was really a half attic, sloping down from a height of eight to ten feet to where the roof joined the floor. It was as large as half a haymow in a huge barn. The high wall at the supper side was as smooth as the plastered wall of a room, save where there appeared what looked like seams, over which nature in some manner had pasted a lighter color of brown rock, looking exactly as if patching plaster had been trowled over the crevices.

"The tomb of Rameses," I murmured between gasps.

"It's a darned fine place to rest—but where do we go from here?" inquired Saul. "Looks like the end of upstairs to me."

MARKS got up and began searching the chamber from end to end, from side to side; he walked as far as he could toward a far corner, then crept and finally belly-crawled to a point where the roof came down almost to the floor, not quite, and he gave a grunt as he stuck his head into a space so that his light was no longer visible to us.

In a moment he pulled out and drawled, "Nope, it ain't the end. There's a lemon

squeezer right here but we can get through and it opens up, beyond. Let's go!"

His drawl denoted excitement, as it always did.

Saul was scrambling toward him, then he stopped.

"Want to go first?" he asked me.

"Not me, neither first nor last," I replied. "I'm pretty well pooped. Look here, it's almost five o'clock. We've been in here three hours now; it'll take us two more to get out and I don't care about driving down that rocky old road to the main line in the dark. It was bad enough in daylight, coming up. I'll wait here for you lads, if you want to make a try for something further."

"Well, let me take the sack with the canteen and carbide in, then," Saul asked. "You've got a pocket supply, of course?"

"Yes, plenty for an hour more, sure. But don't you be gone more than half an hour at most. Make it fifteen minutes, will you?"

"All right," promised Saul, as he shouldered the small Boy Scout type knapsack with a canteen of water and a two-pound can of carbide in it.

I felt of my pockets in my field jacket, made sure my small can of carbide and bottle of water were there and sat down on a smooth slab with my canvas gloves under me, for the dessicated rock which seemed like a dry dust, and was on the surface, contained some moisture, although there was not a drop of water falling from the roof or anywhere.

Marks was already out of sight but we heard his voice booming out of the hole, what he said was indistinguishable, but it sent Saul hurrying after him.

Two minutes later I was in complete silence, alone. Absolute sodden silence. Ten minutes later I was roused to action by the dimming of my carbide light. I took off my tin hat and shook and tapped the lamp. There was no sound of splashing water in the reservoir and the flame had shrunk to a tiny, feeble feather. Hum! I needed water, already. I put my hand in my field jacket pocket, where my spare bottle of water was —and the pocket was wet. The flame of the carbide lamp sputtered and popped out. For a moment I was not only in absolute silence but total darkness. I got out my two-cell electric flashlight and snapped it on. It gave a dull, yellow light—and it showed me the shocking fact that my water bottle was *entirely empty*. The screw top had somehow become loosened, probably in one of the tight places we'd squeezed through and every drop of water had leaked out. As I was wearing waterproof khaki pants and the field jacket had a woolen jacket under it, I had not felt the water on my skin when it leaked out.

The canteen holding a quart was in the knapsack with Saul. My spare carbide can, sealed with cellophane, was all right—but, without water as useless as ashes. My flashlight needed new cells in it—and they were in the knapsack with Saul. It was little more than a glowworm in the vastness of the attic room.

I had a stub of a candle, matches in a waterproof case, cigarettes. I lit the candle and pasted it to a rock with melted wax, put out the flashlight, lit a cigarette. I inspected my headlamp and found that the carbide was powder. I emptied it and filled the reservoir with fresh carbide. The boys would be back soon and give me a laugh. It was my own fault I had let Saul take that knapsack, but he had asked for it and would maybe need its contents more than I would.

I heard whispers again. They were a soft, hissing, as of one—or more—persons, somewhere, not very near me, guardedly talking to each other almost below their breaths.

It sounded down below, in the chasm. Not near the wall we had crept along to get here, near the other end. Then it sounded elsewhere, right in the attic room, up above me.

Why, it must be Marks and Saul coming back, and their voices are muffled by the lemon squeezer. I had an impulse to crawl over there and listen, closer, but not to go in, not with my limited light. It might not last long. I'd stay by the candle.

I got out my battered notebook and began to write in it, more to pass the time than anything else. I was getting a bit cold, having sweated a great deal for three hours and now inactive. Cigarettes began to taste like ashes. The candle flickered, casting odd shadows. Again a whisper—and it came right past my head.

It was a bat, flying about on softly whirring wings, a tiny little, solitary bat. He went away. I was sorry. I like bats, having caught and banded many of them for

friends who study them scientifically. Anyway, I now knew where the whispers came from—so I thought. I wrote a bit, with a pencil, hardly able to see what I scribbled, then looked at my watch.

I couldn't believe it; I wound it and discovered it didn't need winding—but it was only half past five. It had seemed twice as long since the lads left me. Half an hour passed. They'd be back soon, now.

I got up and walked around, aimlessly, forced to keep circling close to the wavering glow of the candle, for I had discovered there were some rifts in the floor, large enough for a leg to go in and be broken.

Three-quarters of an hour, and no sound, no streak of light from that wormhole in the corner. My candle was almost gone. I dug a strip of the sort of tissue that is used in the best households out of a pocket and wrote on it with a soft crayon.

"At 6:30 I am going to start out."

I hung it on a cairn of rock with a stone atop it to hold it.

THE next half hour was an eternity of anxiety. I had decided that Marks and Saul had either got lost, had met up with the desperate convicts—but I discounted that as much as my fading common sense would let me—or they were hurt, or they had found a way back to the bottom of the shaft we had entered by another route—

I started to go out at six-thirty. Halfway down the rough, difficult slope into the chasm, I heard whispers again but I paid no attention; I had all I could do to find where to put my feet, with that dim flashlight beam, and the result was that I got off the route we had used to come in, and down, down into a devil's rock garden—and a drop of water hit me on the hand.

I could just about see the roof with my light, catch the glisten of the drops as they fell, and I got out my empty bottle in a hurry.

The whispering, I discovered, was water slithering down the side of a block of sandstone, rising high above my head. It took some time and nervous aiming to get the mouth of the small bottle under the drops that came free, from fifty feet above me, where the dark, cracked ceiling was letting a dribble through. When a drop went in, it was splashed partly out by the force of its long fall and it took me minutes to capture an ounce or so, and my weak torch was now but a yellow spark. I hastened to get that pitiful ounce into the reservoir, and soon the fresh carbide and water had mixed and formed acetylene gas and at a touch of the flint and steel lighter in the reflector the flame spurted out.

It was like a sunrise to me after the dimness of candle and torch glow, and I felt better. Indeed, not until now did I realize how low I had been feeling, and I was, literally, very low right now, at the bottom of the chasm.

The rugged, threatening mountain of jumbled rock loomed above me seeming to touch the very ceiling, to block the way entirely. Painfully, I started to climb. I knew the direction I had to go to get back to the bottom of the shaft entrance, all right, and I sought for the route over which Marks had led us. He had made some signs, arrows and crosses, with chalk, here and there. I saw one of them and passed it, crawling upward at a steep angle, my camera bag sagging on my back, the straps cutting into my shoulders, and I thought how useless that bag had been, for I had not taken a single picture.

The fact is, there was nothing worth shooting at in the barren vastness of Convict Cave, so far as I had come.

I got near to the top of the rock hill, or so I thought, and discovered, with a sinking feeling, that I could not get through. The hill *did* touch the ceiling, here.

This discouraging discovery threw me off balance, so to speak. It seemed that, somehow, I had not come the right way. I could not find more arrows or crosses anywhere. I moved cautiously to the left, felt a balanced slab tilt under the mere pressure of my hand, and I backed away. Casting my good light about I saw what seemed to be a passage in the hill, close to a wall. I went to it in a hurry and started in—only to see that it came to a dead end. Above the yawning entrance hung a huge slab at an angle suggesting it might slip and drop any instant. I got away from under it and stopped moving, sat down and wiped sweat from my eyes. I tried to calm myself, to get oriented, for I knew I was somehow mixed up in directions. The chasm yawned beneath me, the rock hill rose above, and the roof had

seemed to come down closer since I had come through.

Another try to get over the hill—and I knew I could not do it. I was lost in a rubble, a jungle of sandstone, slippery, sharp-edged, loosely balanced in places. My light would not last more than half an hour, I estimated, without more water. I did not by any means want to descend into the inferno where the drops fell, again, for it had been too great an effort to clamber out.

There was but one haven, and that I could dimly see across the chasm. The attic room I had left. *I just could not get out of here alone.* I was lost; that is, I had lost the way to get out.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was now nearly seven o'clock. Automatically my stomach throbbed with hunger and with thirst, a habit it has at certain hours, and my heart was beating too fast. The muscles of my legs were quivering. If I was going to do anything more—whatever could be done—I'd have to rest.

I got back up to the attic room without too much difficulty, feeling, myself, like an escaped convict who had crept back to his cell after being baffled by some barriers in his efforts to be completely free and had sullenly and desperately retreated to his old confinement, where at least he was safe from danger of death on every side.

I rested, but not much, for I was all tightened up, nerves and muscles, my ears straining, my eyes constantly seeking the appearance of a light from that low corner, where the Madman—yes, I could understand now why they called him so—and Saul, had vanished over two hours ago.

THAT corner, that wormhole in rock, at once tempted me and repelled me. I got up, stiffly, and went over to it, thinking how useless it would be for me to enter it if I could. I was about to make the try, removing the cumbersome bag from my aching shoulders, when I came upon another bag, on the floor close to the small hole.

It was Marks' flash-bulb carrier, a stout canvas sack with a stiff lining of thick cardboard. That stopped me, with the curious feeling of relief that it shot into my confused and excited mind. It meant, to me, that Madman Marks was coming back this way. So I reasoned, as a straw to grasp.

I was getting angry. Fifteen minutes! Half an hour at most, they had promised me. They must have got lost in there, or hurt, maybe killed. These thoughts curbed my anger and brought a desperate feeling of helplessness.

I backed away from the hole. It was entirely too small and tortuous for me to try it with my weight and length, and to twist myself in and through could accomplish no good purpose for I would not be able to go far until my light would fail again.

How long would it be before the farmer would become alarmed at our non-appearance, and muster help? Not until darkness had settled, outside, at any rate, for Marks had merely left word with the housewife that we'd be coming down past the house sometime late in the day or evening.

My plain duty was to get out of here and hasten the alarm. That realization sent a shock of grim determination through me. I had to go down into the inferno, catch more water, find my way up and over that bulwark of rock, after which, I told myself, I would be all right; I'd know the way to the shaft, and once there I could climb out by the ladders and ropes and get to my car and make a dash for town to rouse the Grotto members.

I was down in the devil's hole again, holding up my little bottle and curving my hand around its mouth to make a sort of funnel, to trap as much as would stay in without splashing out, when I saw, against the ceiling high above me, a flash of light. Then I heard voices.

It seemed to me that I sailed up out of the satanic palisade on wings, to the level of the attic room, and as my head came up over the edge, I saw angels approaching without wings. They were limping, shaking themselves now and then, staggering a bit, their voices low and husky. Alive and kicking.

"Hi, there! Where in hell have you been?" I shouted, again with a tinge of anger.

"You said it, brother!" husked Madman Marks. "You said it. Right in hell."

When I got close to them I saw that they were wet and muddy from head to foot. Madman Marks' usually ruddy face was pale and drawn. Saul's eyes were wide and staring.

"You got lost, eh?" I said.

"Yeah!" they both admitted dully.

"What did you find in there?"

"Them," replied Marks, turning to look back toward the worm hole.

"The convicts?"

"Yeah. Bones, mostly. Let's get out of here."

"You mean they were dead—that long? I thought you said, the sheriff said, they only escaped last month."

"Last month *a year ago,* didn't I tell you?" croaked Marks.

"No! If you did I didn't catch that. I thought—they might still be alive. My God! And you—we—came into this hellhole to look for bones? Yeah, let's get out of here right away. Hurt any, you two?" I was decent enough to inquire.

"Naw, but cold and wet and tired and hungry—and I'm all through with Convict's Cave, forever," announced Madman Marks.

"So am I," mumbled Saul, who was seemingly almost in a state of shock.

"And so—am—I!" I repeated eloquently. "But how do you know it was the convicts?"

"Their clothes. I took a picture of 'em, for the sheriff."

"With what kind of light?" I demanded. "You left your bulbs here."

"This kind of light," replied Marks, and a ghost of a grin crinkled his white face, as he drew a silvery looking ball out of his sack, touched a match to a protruding end, and tossed it down into the chasm.

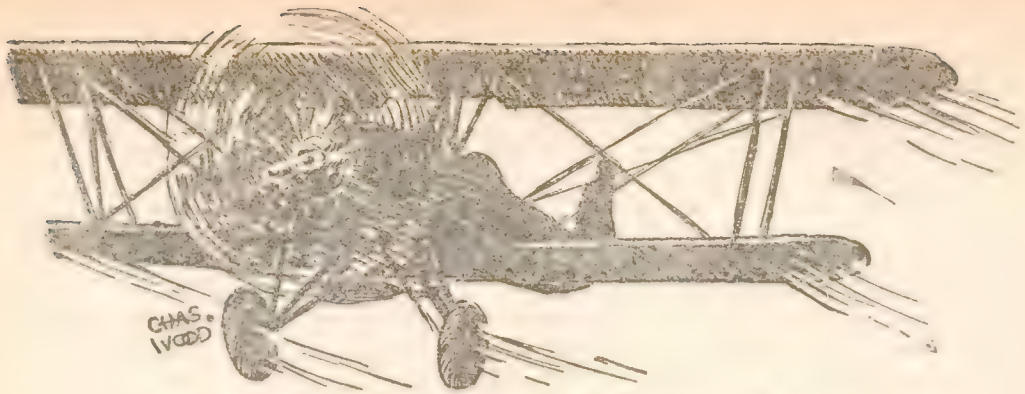
There was a flash and a flare of blinding white light that illuminated the chasm from end to end, from top to bottom, and painted a picture of what I had been groveling through so aimlessly and uselessly, in semi-gloom.

"One of my magnesium bombs," Marks explained. "That's my last one. Except for them, we'd be lost yet, I reckon. Let's go, let's go!"

"Try and stop me! I know how those convicts felt when they got lost."

"Yeah, so do we, I guess," muttered Saul. "So do we. One of those bombs lighted things up for us so we found out we were on a different level than the one we went in on. That was how we got lost; that was how they got lost. They only had candles and a flashlight. They had crawled around in circles in a maze a good many times. Their tracks is what threw us off our route. Messed up the mud and it stayed messed. I reckon they were trying to find another way out, down by Elk River, which Marks says is thought to exist. Maybe it does. I don't want any part of it."

That was all the conversation we had in Convict Cave. Nobody will ever explore it any more, because the State sent bulldozers up and buried the entrance, deep and firm. There is a convict camp over on the other side of the Knob.



Saddles In The Sky

By JOHN PRESCOTT

MISTER, when calamities occur in New Mexico they generally begin early and they stampede each other for first consideration; they're like four leading ladies in a three-act play—they all want to crab the act and they know there isn't much time to do it in. That morning out there on Cap Randall's Pecos River spread they began early; right after sun-up.

When I was jarred out of sleep in the bunkhouse I thought dawn was coming up like thunder, but after those first few minutes of waking numbness I knew it was the old Model A wagon wheeling up in some sort of a rash or other; and because I was foreman around that place I had my boots on and was at the door before the blur of sleep was out of my head. When you work for Cap Randall you move fast—dead or alive.

I wasn't the only one around there that took that to heart; there was already a bunch of the boys crowding around Curly Higgins when I got to the front fender of the wagon. Curly was all hot and dusty, and his eyes were redder than his face.

"They did it again," he was ranting. "They did it again. Last night; they got off with two heifers and a pair of calves. Just plain evaporated."

Curly broke off there and ground to a

Just Like in the Old Days; We Had a Posse All Right, but There Just Wasn't Anywhere for That Posse to Get Goin' To

kind of exhausted halt—out of words. You could tell he was getting the wind up again, though; he had his big hat held way up behind his shoulder like he was sunfishing a bronc and his mouth was open just waiting for his mind to get back into gear.

But nothing came out. Cap Randall came up there behind us the way he sometimes did and Curly froze like an Indian idol. I didn't see Cap, but I heard him; he had a voice like a gale from the Panhandle. And from the way he was roaring at Curly he was set to blow all day.

"Shut up, Higgins!" he howled. "You don't make sense; you're raving like a hungry baby!"

Cap more or less plowed through the crowd like he was walking through deep grass; everyone just gave way—leaped away. He was big in all ways and all directions; big and beefy, with a mind like a steel trap. When he got up there to Curly he leaned over him, head and shoulders, and pulled Curly's hat back onto his head.

"How many again?" he asked.

"Four," Curly said, but he was quiet that time; he was talking to the boss. "Two heifers and two calves. Got pulled out of the big grazing herd some time during the night. It was bedded down over beyond where the Black comes into the Pecos. When we rolled out this morning and checked the young ones like you said to they were gone."

"Who's out there with you?" Cap growled.

"There's Johnny Dawson, Hernando, Miguel, Steve and me. I put 'em on the prowl for them critters, then I came on in to tell what happened."

"Well, get the hell back out there now and help them," Cap said in rising volume. He was talking to all of us then, orating rather, and I'd lay even money the sound of his voice was peeling snow off Sierra Blanca. He was forecasting doom and oblivion for those rustlers and he was threatening us with death or worse if we didn't bring them in by their spurs.

He was a fire and brimstone cowman, and while it was a point of pride with him that his old daddy had personally supervised the last rustler hanging in Eddy county, it was also a point of pain that the honor couldn't have befallen him.

"All except you, Joey," he said to me as he wound up. "You come with me." And as fast as he'd come in there he took off again, with me trailing him up past the corral to the main house; and him shouting and foaming at me over his shoulder.

"I'll get them rustlers if it takes me the rest of my life," he raved. "If I have to trail 'em into Carlsbad Caverns on my hands and knees, I'll do it."

He was truly formidable, but I'd heard it all before, and we went through it every time some of the stock was missing.

The most frustrating part about the whole thing was that there was no trail. It didn't stand to reason that a bunch of critters could be hiked out of a herd and taken off without leaving some kind of a trail; but they were. They didn't leave a thing.

IN THE old days before my time, a rustling outfit more often than not left a fairly decent trail, for a ways anyway. But this whole thing was almost eerie. The best trackers in the state had been coming up against blank walls for eight weeks; there weren't any tracks anywhere at all, not even trailer tracks, or trucks, like some of the guys thought were being used. They discounted those pretty much anyway; there weren't many roads over that rough ground, and those there were had blocks thrown up on 'em by the cattlemen; all through Eddy, Chaves and Otero counties where the rustling had been going on.

"Why calves?" Cap shouted at the wind. "Why heifers? And why always two or three or maybe four at a time?"

I didn't have any answer to that, and I couldn't have said anything if I had; we were going too fast and I didn't have the breath to keep his pace and talk too. I just stumbled along and listened; he didn't calm down until we were up at the main house. It was quiet in there, and I wasn't more than two feet away from him when we sat down at a table; he didn't have to shout anymore.

"I'm going to beat this business, Joey," he said. "I've been making plans, and they ought to start popping today."

Whenever Cap Randall had said things like that in the past it was a sort of storm warning. It was time to pull in your ears and so forth.

"I'm going to modernize," he went on. "I'm going to track those rustlers in a way they never on earth figured on being tracked."

"They haven't left no tracks," I explained. Whip-minded as he was, Cap sometimes overlooked essentials when he got in a fever.

"That ain't what I mean. I mean I got a way to get up on top of 'em and hunt 'em out. I got an airplane coming out here today."

"How's that?" I asked. Sometimes a strong wind can play tricks on your hearing, you know; and he'd been shouting so loud outside before I thought I was suffering from some sort of a hangover of that. But Cap didn't pay me any heed at all; he just kept going on like I hadn't said a word.

"I got one of those boys that used to fly the army planes over at the bombing school at Carlsbad during the war. He kept in touch with me all the time he was overseas and since he's come back; and I figured he might be just the boy to handle this job around here. He's been up in Oklahoma dusting crops with his own ship."

Hearing Cap talk that way brought back a lot of nice memories of those days during the war when the cadets and their officers would come over to the ranch for Sunday barbecues. They were a nice bunch of boys, a little wild, some of 'em, but a nice bunch just the same.

I remembered one in particular, a pilot name of Jerry Dillon, and he used to fly the bombardiers around the ranges out there. He got to be a fighter pilot after while I heard, and the papers said he even got to be an ace.

I never wondered in the least about that because I got a ride with him one time in one of those twin engine planes they used over there at Carlsbad; an AT-11 he called it. It was all against the regulations for me to go up with him, but that didn't seem to bother him at all; and he did things to that airplane and to my stomach that never should ever on God's earth happen. I never did forget that, and ever after that when ever someone talked about him I was kind of glad he was way over there in France raising hell with the Jerries instead of so uncomfortably close as Carlsbad.

"The reason I'm telling you all this," Cap was going on, "is because I want you to sort of take charge of him. You're foreman, you know, and you'll have to help him out—show him the ropes and all."

I GUESS I should have heard the warning bells jangling right then; but simple peon that I was I just sat back, basking in the light of my own self-importance while he babbled on. It was all sweet syrup, what he was saying, up to a point; and then I got the rudest shock an old vaquero could ever get.

"You'll have to fly with him, of course; he won't know his way around too well unless you do."

Cap made that remark as though he was reading something off a menu; he was just telling the waiter he'd like that steak rare. And when I made a kind of croaking noise he looked at me as though I was some sort of panhandler pulling at his sleeve. His eyebrows went way up and he stared.

"What?" he said. "Don't you want to fly?"

He slashed me on the back with a huge hand and laughed, almost fiendishly, in my ear.

"Of course you do, and you will, Joey; believe me, you will. You'll be up there in the blue by mid afternoon." He paused and thrust a menacing finger under my nose. "I want a definite end to this rustling business, Joey. You're foreman, and believe me, it's worth your job to see that it's stamped out. You fly or haul your freight."

An as a sinister parting shot he told me the pilot was Jerry Dillon.

I don't think I really snapped out of it until about three o'clock, and by that time there was nothing in the world to be done because I was sitting three feet behind that lanky Jerry Dillon in what he said was a PT-13; and we were something like three thousand feet above the ground. That yellow hair of his was all wrapped up in a helmet, but I could see his eyes laughing at me in a little mirror he had.

"How do you like it?" And he should ask; as though he'd forgotten the swabbing we'd given the cockpit of that AT-11. But if he didn't remember I couldn't tell him; the conversation was one way, and I couldn't talk back, being, as I was, fastened onto the

end of something called a gosport. I heard a few laughs bubbling through the tube, and then we got down to business and began scouting the ground.

Cap had given him some kind of a map he'd drawn up which had the layouts of all the ranches in the three counties that had lost stock, and the approximate positions on the rangeland where those critters had been taken from. It covered quite a spread of ground, and since Cap was paying the bills we skimmed down to our range first.

It was truly a remarkable thing how little time it took to get down to where the herd had bedded down on the previous night. Dillon just flew south along the Pecos, dipping lower all the time until all that white and green and brown land was nothing but a wide blur to me in the rear seat.

When we got to where the Black came into the Pecos at Malaga he upended his right wing flat against the wall of the sky and my innards were still on their way down into my boots when we were level again and headed hell-fire for the east; and going lower all the time.

After a bit he begun to throttle back some and before long it got so I could breathe without having all that air jammed into my throat and mouth; and I could see better too—we were around to one side of where the herd was scattered out, and Dillon was taking the whole thing easy.

We flew around there that way for a bit, looking down at all those little bugs clustered around and strung out loosely to the sides; and at the other bugs which were scooting along at the end of powdery dust streamers; and at the bigger, stationary bugs which were the chow wagon and the Model A. A couple of times he got down real close, and throttled way back with the nose up high in the wind just kind of hovering.

"Don't get scared," he said recklessly. "She won't stall out. I'm just checking the terrain around here."

Well, I could have told him all about the terrain around there without his going down there and sticking my neck in a noose. That ground was so rough it bruised the snakes and gilas that lived on it; they had to move slow and careful lest they bash off some of their scales.

We did that a few times and then we went swinging off down some of those dried up stream beds and arroyos for a while; me hanging on with both hands and with my boot heels digging divots in the bottom of the cockpit. The air down there was about as rough as the rocks below us, and I wasn't setting much store on the strength of that safety belt.

He kept along east that way until we got to the end of Cap's land, swung to the north and went way up past some of the other ranches on the list; up past the potash mines and Halfway and Loco Hills and into Chaves County. Just a look-around was what he called it.

Then he headed off west toward the Sacremento range.

I didn't have any idea what he thought he was going to accomplish by going along the ground that way at a hundred miles an hour. We certainly couldn't see any cattle tracks that way; and if by chance we'd stumble onto some of the stock we'd be going too danged fast to know what it was anyway.

But that didn't seem to bother him at all; he seemed to be more or less out for some kind of a joy-ride—for him, not for me. He was just being casual about the whole thing, skimming along here and there, looking at this and that; and from what I could tell, not doing much good at all. And why he headed for the Sacramentos I couldn't say.

THAT range runs north and south, and heaves up out of the ground like a big spine, kind of white and gray along the flanks, but all timber further up. The whole thing is Lincoln National Forest, and that runs into the Guadelupe range on the south right down to the Texas line.

Further north a ways is the Mescalero Apache Reservation and then Lincoln Forest again, along the Sierra Blancas all the way up as far as Ancho. It was all high and timbered, and while I couldn't see any reason in the world why Dillon would want to fly over that I didn't mind it as much as the other; I guess those trees looked softer down there.

We flew along there quite a while and then Dillon swung around to the east once more.

"We better get going back," he said. "We can't stay up much over three hours."

I was all for that, and he got no com-

plaints from me at all; not even when he went down the mountain in a sort of sickening swish right down to the flat land and along it at a million miles an hour. I didn't make any sort of a peep at all until we came in along the road that led into Cap's ranch—we were going to land there; and then for all the wild yelling I did I still couldn't hear myself above the unearthly bellowing of that engine or the screaming frenzy of the ground-loop as we landed.

I was still yelling bloody murder when we settled down in the middle of all that boiling dust, rising yellow and shining way up in the sky. After a bit we stopped sliding and the engine shut off, and then there was only me; and then I ran out of breath and it was all just hot and silent. I couldn't see very well in all that dirt and I was kind of surprised to see Jerry Dillon come around to the side of the cockpit. He was down there on the ground and he didn't look happy and pleasant any more. That nice face of his was all hard and it had sharp lines around his mouth; and there was fire snapping around in his eyes.

"That came pretty close to being our last ride," he said. He was angry, that boy, and he wasn't looking at me, but way off toward the west.

"Pretty close nothing," I told him with some heat. "That *was* my last ride; I'll never again throw a saddle on the back of one of these things."

"You don't read me," he said; and he was looking at me that time, with a little humor showing through all that anger. "We got shot at somewhere back there. Shot one tire all to hell and gone, and poked a couple of holes in the elevator."

And, mister, I just sat back and breathed. I'd been doing combat flying and never knew it.

THAT night there was a big pow-wow out there at Cap Randall's ranch. They came from all around there because Cap had made sure they'd all heard about our being fired on that way. That was something they all understood; that gunfire. There was still no way of knowing how all that stock got taken off or where it was being kept, but gunfighting was something they could put their fingers on.

It made me feel somewhat like a hero to be prancing around out there on the patio, drawing beer from a keg Cap had set up and relating to all those people just how the thing had occurred; I'd already forgotten how scared I'd been.

Of course I wasn't really sure myself, but I weaved the best yarn I could; kind of conservative when Dillon had an eye on me, but I embellished it some when he wasn't so close. The whole thing was just like the old days when they were working up a posse to go slamming out after someone or other. We had the posse all right, and we had the fever up to go out; but there just didn't seem to be any place for that posse to go.

There got to be a lot of conjecturing about that as the keg got lower and the night got later. There was a good deal of loud talk, and maybe some of it was mine, because somewhere around midnight Dillon told me I'd hung enough hustlers for one night and to come along with him to Carlsbad and get a new tire for the plane. We took one of Cap's cars, wheeled out onto the main road near Loving and rode along quietly under the stars. They were big that night, just hanging over the roof of the car; and it wasn't the beer that made them look that way.

"I'm beginning to work things out," he said after a bit. "It's slow work, but things seem to be shaping up into a pattern."

"A bullet pattern," I said. "I agree with you."

"In a way it's a good thing that happened," he said. "It drew my attention to something I hadn't looked at too close. It gave me a lead on where that stock might be."

Where's that?" I asked him. I was all for getting that posse under arms and storming that place. I told him so, but he didn't seem to be in any hurry.

"I don't have it pinpointed," he said. "I've just got a general idea of the area; we've got to know more."

"Where, where is it?" I didn't like to be hung up that way.

"Somewhere up in the Sacramentos or along the Lincoln Forest."

"How in hell would they ever get up in there?" I asked. I always figured that Dillon was a little weird, but right then I

knew it. It was bad enough the way those calves and what-not were disappearing without him trying to tell me they were eight thousand feet up there in the Sacrementos, or the Guadelupes or Sierra Blancas.

"I can't tell you how they got there," Dillon smiled, "because I don't know. Like I said, it's just a hunch; I'm trying to think it out."

I shut up on that one. There was no way in the world a sane man could follow the thinking of that Dillon. I just sat back there and let the beer wash around and cursed the day that made me dependent on him and his danged airplane for my job. I didn't say another word until we got back to the ranch.

I THOUGHT things would be pretty quiet by then, but it seemed there was more noise than ever. It was a different kind of noise, though, than before; it wasn't party noise. It was fighting—mad noise.

"They got Miguel," Cap yelled at us when we pulled up in the yard. "Curly just brought him in with the wagon, and he's got a knife hole dang near all the way through him. Dead before he hit the ground."

We got to the bunkhouse fast and went inside where they had Miguel all laid out on the poker table. He was a mess all right, just like Cap had said. They'd used a real skewer on him, right straight through the heart. His dark face was almost gray, and it was all twisted and pulled.

"Never had a chance to draw or nothin', I guess," Curley said. "He just dropped without a sound; I didn't hear a thing."

"Where and when?" Dillon asked. Dillon had that strange look around his eyes and mouth again, and he was looking real sharp at Miguel and at where the knife had gone in.

"It was near to midnight," Curley said. "After the herd had been done for some time Miguel said he was going to swing around once to see how things were. I was going to turn in, but I thought I'd stay up and wait for him. After an hour or so he didn't come back, so I went out lookin'. He was way down at the south end of it, lying flat on his back; and his horse was grazing near him."

Dillon said, "Hmm," and then he looked close at poor Miguel's face again; he was near enough to kiss him. "Miguel was no Mexican?"

"Why, no," I told him. "He was no Mex; he was an Apache. Only been around here three or four months, but he was a good hand."

"I never had no complaints," Curley said. "He worked with my crew most of the time."

For once Dillon didn't make that annoying, "Hmm," noise. He just stood quiet, tall in the lantern light; and his face was looking right through those walls and far out beyond somewhere.

"We'd better go," he said, and he took me by the arm like a little kid and led me outside. It was getting light already, and seeing the gray of the dawn made me remember that I hadn't had a wink of sleep all night. I told that to Dillon, but he was not impressed at all.

"I don't think we've got much time," he said "These things have been snowballing on us; especially that knifing. I think they'll try to move out now."

"Who and where?" I asked. "I was getting sore at that guy. It looked like I was going to miss breakfast, too; and for a person of my girth that was no small thing. "If we're going out somewhere looking for trouble we'd better get that posse organized."

"No time," Dillon said. "Besides, we can't take a whole posse in the PT. Just you and me going on this one."

Well, he had me faced up that time, and there was no way I could back out of another ride in that danged thing without looking like the biggest coward on the Pecos.

"Maybe I ought to take off my party clothes anyway," I said. I was wearing a real pretty silk shirt and a silver mounted belt. That shirt was like a desert sunset.

"You got no time for that either; we got to change that tire and get upstairs." Dillon began to drawl. "All you really got time for, podner, is to get you some hardware; and you better make it big. What's the biggest shotgun around here?"

"There's a ten-gauge double gun hanging over the fireplace in the main house," I said. "But I don't think it's been used since the Lincoln county war."

"Well, get it," Dillon said. "And you better fix it up with a buck-load."

"In case of what?" I asked him, and not too civilly. A man can take a lot of that hokey-poke, but when he's foreman he's got a right to know just what he's gunning up for. "Just what in hell are we going after with a ten-gauge gun?"

We were at the plane, then, and Dillon paused with his shoulder under the wing. He gave me a wild kind of grin, like he had Jerry in his sights.

"Well, Joey," he said. "This may surprise you some; but I got an idea we're going after a jackrabbit. The biggest jack you ever saw."

THAT one didn't help my frame of mind one bit, but there was nothing more about it that I could worm out of him. He just got secretive and evasive and said it was a hunch and that he couldn't be too sure; he said we'd know when we got where we were going. And that was all there was to it. I was pretty sore about it and I let him know it; as a matter of fact, I was so completely on the outs with that guy I even forgot to be scared when we scattered down Cap Randall's road in the PT.

When we took off, or got air-borne as he called it, the sun was just coming up over Mescalero Ridge. It was big and bright and all around it the sky was shining with pale blues and soft pinks that washed up high above. It was one of those things the song-writers make tunes about; it was a true beauty, but I was in no mood to enjoy it. I was trying to figure things out on my own hook, and I wasn't getting very far with it.

The whole mess had been one inexplicable thing after another; and it was more than just annoying. When you've been a foreman for nigh on to twenty years you figure you know a few things about what's going on in your own back yard; but that rustling thing was like a big quagmire with no bottom. I just kept sinking further into it. And Miguel was the topper. There was something about that one that just didn't make sense.

I hadn't given much thought to it at first, except that it meant those rustlers were coming out into the open somewhat; but sitting up there in the airplane I could see where some ends of that didn't meet.

It would have been different if that Apache had been shot. A man can lay off somewhere behind the rocks with a rifle and lift a guy out of the saddle before he knows what's happened to him; but it ain't so easy to do it with a knife—a man can see that coming, especially if it's coming from the front, which was the case with Miguel.

It didn't look like Miguel had stepped into any sort of ambush at all; rather—and it was a shocker to stumble onto it—it appeared that Miguel had angled over that way maybe to meet someone he knew; and had been knifed for his pains. It appeared that he'd probably been right down there on the ground talking to whoever it was and that he'd had the boom lowered on him when he wasn't expecting it; got crossed up maybe.

I was so taken by that idea that I wanted to pass it on to Dillon, but any notion I had along that line was very rudely squashed. Suddenly, and without any warning, he had a wing up and we were heading straight down toward the timber; we were up over the Mescalero Apache Reservation and the way things looked just then it seemed like we were going to bore a hole straight through the middle of it. Then he levelled out and swung into a steep turn around a sort of clearing down there.

"We've been tagged again," he said. "In the aileron." And he was talking some more, but it wasn't any sort of language I understood at all, and it took me a while to reason out that he had a radio up in there with him and that he was putting in a call to the nearest State Police barracks.

"I got 'em spotted now," he said after a moment. "They're down there in that clearing; they must have the cattle down there too. All we got to do now is sit up here until the police close in on them; we got to cover them from the air so they don't get out."

I was about ten yards behind him on all that, and I couldn't see how in the world anyone would get cattle up there without anyone knowing about it; and once in there I couldn't see how they'd ever get out; if that's where they were.

But any doubt I might have had about the rustlers being down in there was boosted out of my mind under a full head of steam; because the air around us there

abruptly filled with more bees than a hive. And being lead, those bees had quite a sting.

We were down pretty low, then, just over the trees and pouring across the small, round hollow of the clearing when all that began. Looking down in there I could see those little spurts of smoke snapping away from the gun barrels in the sunlight, and split seconds later there'd be a hole in the wing. And once, by golly, the windshield in front of me sprayed glass all over the cockpit.

I guess that stuff got me pretty mad, that shooting. I'd been sliding along in a fog all the time, but there were those rustlers down there steaming away at us, and that was something I understood and could react to naturally. I got the ten-gauge up there and shoved the barrel out into the wind; and I was just about to cut loose with a load when the engine sputtered—and then stopped dead; cut spang out it did. And we were down in the widest quiet I ever heard.

"They knocked us out," Jerry Dillon said, and he dipped the nose down a little so we picked up some speed. I just froze up all tight and breathless when that engine died; but when Dillon's voice came back to me, steady and level and sort of competent I knew it couldn't be quite so bad as I figured.

"I'm going to try and drop us into that clearing," he said. "I'll have to sip her all the way down, so get ready to hop out quick when we light. And hang onto that shotgun; we're sure going to need it now."

That was one thing he didn't have to tell me at all; I had a death grip on that gun and my hands were getting tighter and whiter around the barrel and stock as we went down. We went in fast, and the closer we got to those trees the bigger they were and the faster we traveled.

We were going to hit; we were going to smash into the ground and spread ourselves all the way down to El Paso Gap; we were going to carve a swath in that timber straight to the Texas line. But just when I was getting all tightened up to plunge on through into oblivion the ground was no longer where it had been; it had fallen away, and amazingly, we were tearing low over the ground of the clearing—and in the next breath the PT was skinning itself in the brush and trees.

There were more kinds of noise in that bust-up than I'd ever heard on any one occasion before; there were crackings and bangings and scrapings and tearings—and then when we settled down in one place and Dillon and I were coming up out of that wreck like a pair of squirrels, there was the rifle fire.

It was off to one side, that shooting, and it was trying to get at us through the high geyser of sunlit dust which the PT had kicked up in the center of the clearing. Those rustlers were shooting kind of blind and when I figured out where some of it was coming from I let go with one of the barrels on the ten-gauge. That worked, by golly; I heard a wild scream and some one of them kicked up a big fuss for a few seconds over in the brush on the other side. I let go with the other barrel, and there was more of it; they didn't like that buck-load at all.

For the first few frenzied moments I didn't pay much attention to Dillon, but after I tore up the brush with the second barrel and was re-loading I heard him spatting away with the .45 he'd brought along, and then he was beating me on the shoulder and yelling bloody murder.

"That jackrabbit, Joey!" he was shouting. "It's just like I figured! There she goes; they're trying to get away! Give her both barrels!"

For a couple of crazy seconds there I thought he'd been grazed along the head by one of those rustlers, and that he was just as loose upstairs as a Mexican gourd; but when I took my eyes off his face and looked out through the dust into the clearing I thought I was sliding into a state of shock.

There was out there in that haze without a doubt the weirdest contraption I'd ever laid eyes on; a-larrupin' and a-hoppin' across the clearing, with a big, shiny glass face and great big ears swinging like mad overhead. It was a first class nightmare in broad daylight, that thing; and it was heading right our way to mow us down.

"Get her, Joey!" Dillon yelled. "They're trying to get away!" But I was already standing up there on my feet right in the open, and what he was saying just filtered through from a long ways off.

I gave that prancing bad dream one barrel, and then I gave it the other; and I quick reloaded while it was just about to leap right up out of the clearing and gave it both barrels—a mad thing to do with a ten-gauge, even for a guy my size. But that was the one that broke that critter's back; and nearly broke mine too.

I don't know what really made the most racket, me swinging backward through the brush from the recoil or that thing collapsing in mid-air and spilling Apaches all over the clearing. But the noise in there reached a new crescendo, and then just as quickly broke off and died away; even the rifle fire.

BY THE time Jerry Dillon got around to pulling me up off my back a squad of State Troopers was out there herding the sorriest bunch of Apaches I ever saw into the clearing. They looked mad and sullen, and one of the Troopers said they were a renegade outfit that was suspected of a lot of things. They'd been wanted for some time, and it was clever of 'em to hide out up there in the Reservation; especially with that cattle.

"You know what you bagged, Joey?" Dillon asked me. "You got yourself an R-5A; that's a helicopter. That's what's been running off with all the stock around here. During the war one of those things could go into a front-line area and bring out four litters, strapped to the side. And it can just as easily carry four calves."

Well, I'd never in my life seen one of those things before, not even in the magazines, and it got me kind of sore all over again to think those renegades not only knew what one was, but was using one to steal our beef with to boot.

"Maybe some of these guys were in the army," Dillon said, like he was reading my mind. "Won't be hard to find out anyway; or maybe worked in some factory where they were being made. Might have picked one up as war surplus somewhere."

"That's only detail," I said. "What I want to know is how you got around to figuring this all out." That Dillon was full of surprises, but I'd never expected anything like that from him.

"Lack of a trail, for one thing," he said. "That pointed to air as a method; but the ground is too rough for a regular plane to land and take off; especially at night. That made me think of these things."

"Now that ain't bad at all," I said. "That's real clever."

"When we got shot at yesterday I knew we'd flown over the hideout; and when Miguel was knifed I had a hunch for a pinpoint. He was an Apache too, you know."

"And he was the contact man for Cap Randall's ranch," I said. I was getting straightened out on that Miguel. "The night he got himself killed he probably got greedy and asked for an extra cut."

"Now you've got it," Dillon said, and he gave me a big grin. "Let's look at that thing."

We walked over to where the helicopter was all sagged down on the ground there and Dillon poked around in it for a few minutes. It didn't look like much, twisted up the way it was, and I couldn't see how a thing like that could ever get off the ground at all, let lone sneak down onto the range at night and lift our calves out.

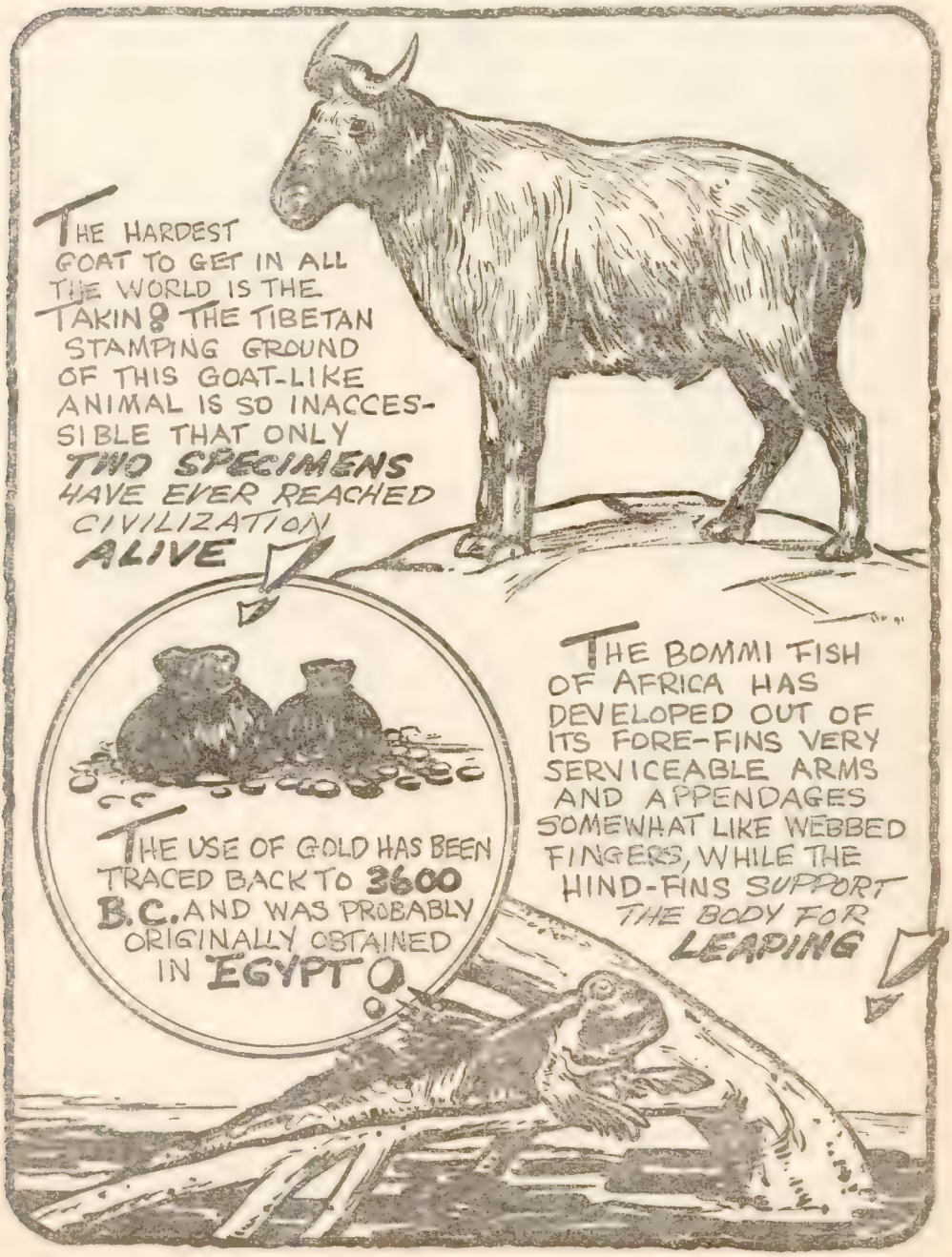
"You know," he said, and he had that strange look in his eyes again. "You know, this thing isn't such an awful wreck at that. If we stayed up here for a few days and got some parts we could probably fly it out to Cap Randall's by the end of the week."

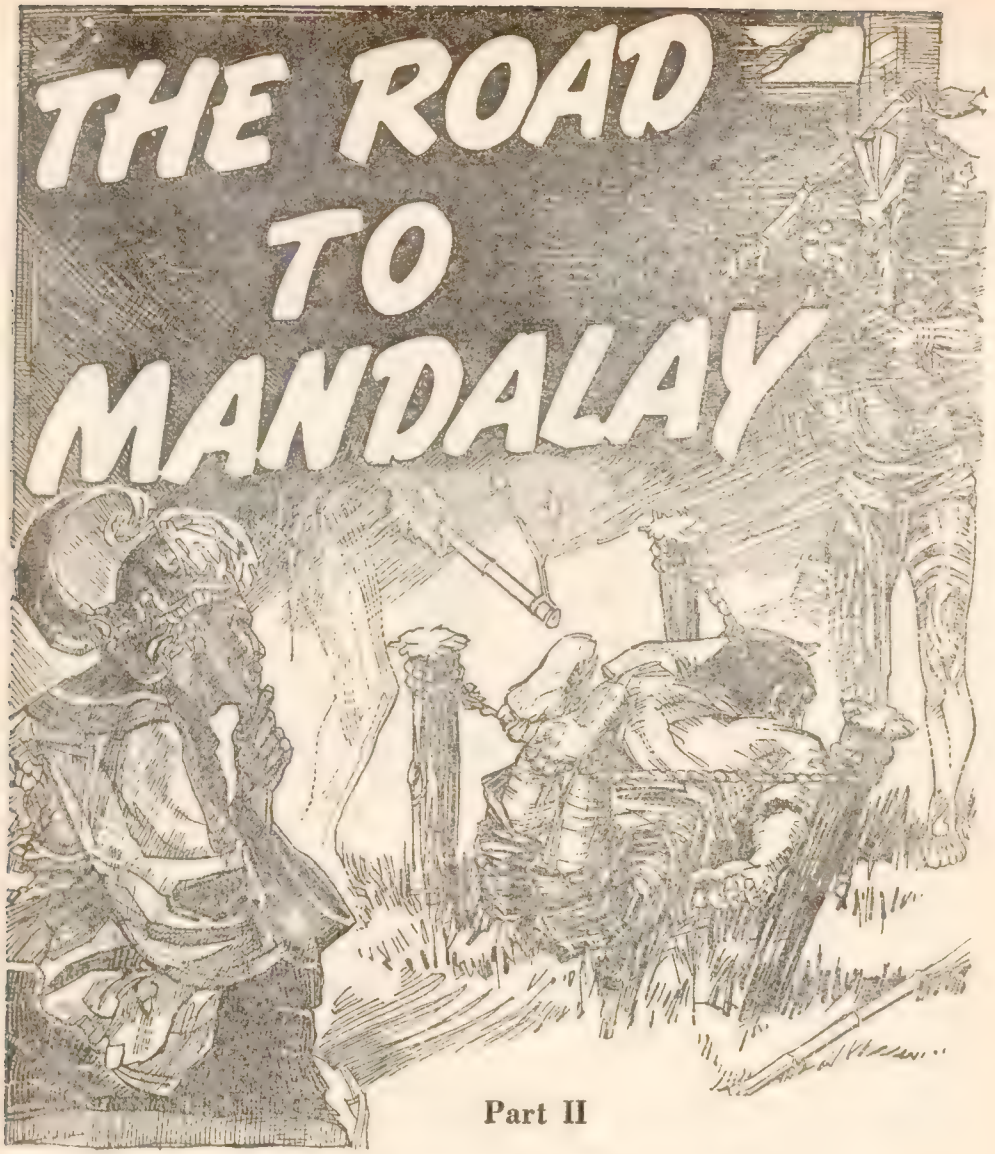
Well, now you can't humor a guy like that all the time. There's got to be a line drawn somewhere; especially where my neck was concerned.

"You go right ahead," I told him. "And I wish you every bit of luck in the world. But I'm going to hook a ride back with the Troopers. And if I can't get one with them I'm going to walk. I'm old and beat out and tired. I dang near lost my job, but now I've got it back and I want to stay alive to appreciate it. It's a hundred miles back there and I'm wearing my hand-stitched party boots, but I'll walk it."

I didn't wait for him to say anything to that; I just turned and walked on across the clearing. The sun was hot up there, and the ten-guage felt like the barrels were filled to the sights with lead; but I wasn't going to go back up off the ground again. Not if I wound up crawling back on my belly, I wasn't. No sir.

Curioddities By Will


THE HARDEST GOAT TO GET IN ALL THE WORLD IS THE TAKIN? THE TIBETAN STAMPING GROUND OF THIS GOAT-LIKE ANIMAL IS SO INACCESSIBLE THAT ONLY TWO SPECIMENS HAVE EVER REACHED CIVILIZATION ALIVE
THE USE OF GOLD HAS BEEN TRACED BACK TO 3600 B.C. AND WAS PROBABLY ORIGINALLY OBTAINED IN EGYPT
THE BOMMI FISH OF AFRICA HAS DEVELOPED OUT OF ITS FORE-FINS VERY SERVICEABLE ARMS AND APPENDAGES SOMEWHAT LIKE WEBBED FINGERS, WHILE THE HIND-FINS SUPPORT THE BODY FOR LEAPING



Part II

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

THE STORY SO FAR

THIS is a story of the annexation of Upper Burma, "the road to Mandalay," where King Thibaw and his queen, the Supaya-lat, misruled the land, harassed European residents, oppressed and murdered Burmese subjects, including 75 royal princes and a number of princesses. This, too, is the story of Dan Kirby, who after some years in the States, returns to Burma to carry on with his father's teak interests; and finds that Thibaw, has by trickery usurped the Lion Throne.

Dan's story is that of a young American setting out to make his fortune, which he does, but only after being sucked into the murderous intrigues of Mandalay, and taking a small part in the closing phase of the Third Burmese War. Dan's father had as friend a Scot, Alex Fenton, and on his return Alex and his daughter Diane welcome him—Diane and Kirby realize that the teen-age plans they made for themselves before

"Back Yonder," the Old Man Said, "You and I Died. We Can Not Die Again!"

he left are good enough to have endured until his return.

Kirby runs right into trouble. He finds a 20,000 rupee fine levied against him and comes to Mandalay to try to have it reversed. It's just one of Thibaw's ways of raising money. Kirby has company in misery. British residents are harassed and blackmailed by being forced to buy enormous batches of state lottery tickets, in which lottery hardly anyone but the King wins. In the midst of Kirby's Shwe difficulties, in which U. Tha, friend and friend of Alex Tanaris, is unable to help him, there is a gruesome threat. Astrologers and magicians, though operating in rank defiance of Buddist faith and law, have enormous prestige among the Burmese. When a city is walled or a palace built, there must be buried at each corner one or more human victims, plus a jar of oil. When in time the oil seeps out, or the jars are cracked by earthquake shock, it is deemed necessary to move the inhabitants away from that site since the spirits of the buried victims no longer will keep *nats* (spirits, demons) from harassing the living. But Mandalay, having so much permanent masonry structure, so many factories, can't be moved except at enormous loss. So, the astrologers and magicians get busy with a compromise: round up extra new victims, lots of victims, bury them (alive) and let the city stay put.

U Shwe Tha, though unable to protect Kirby from sabotage and swindle by officials, was still valuable in checking the voracious officials. Thus, when U Shwe Tha vanishes during the first round-up of victims, Kirby and Alex Fenton are certain their friends has been nailed at a time and

in such a way that his ordinary popularity cannot help save him.

Kirby and Fenton and San Ya, a jolly embezzler, resolve to find U Shwe Tha. This involves snooping in the enormous palace, which is one quarter of a mile square, and girdled by a moat 50 yards wide. Within, there is a warren of buildings, official residences; and then, the royal precincts. King Thibaw's palace has something in common with a Chinese *yamen*: a walled town, you might call it, in the heart of square-walled Mandalay.

In the course of this desperate rescue attempt, Kirby learns, though without documentary proof, that the French consul is preparing to present to Thibaw, a treaty favoring France, and excluding Britain. Mixed up in the deal is Pierre Lecoin, a young Frenchmen, who to Kirby's way of thinking, is far too friendly with Diane.

Kirby, his friend, U Shwe Tha still in danger, and his teak enterprise facing extinction, resolves to get proof of the treaty's existence: something strong enough to stir up a hornet's nest. Following a clue, obtained by Diane from a lady of the court, Kirby figures he is surely going to grab a copy of the treaty. Instead, he blunders into a sudden opportunity to release U Shwe Tha, who with many other victims has been sequestered pending the day when the astrologers will say it is lucky to bury the victims.

VII

TOWARD dusk, and after more shopping, Kirby returned. Women were bringing rice to the soldiers who squatted in a small guardhouse at the right of the jail entrance. There they had spread their mats. The walls reached less than half way to the roof. It was a pavilion rather than a house.

"Still looking for Maung Yo?"

"He's not in the palace prison," Kirby said, feigning solemn stupidity. When they had done laughing, he added, just as seriously, "I asked them. Maybe he hasn't been brought here yet."

Jailer and soldiers assured Kirby he was welcome to wait for the night patrols to bring in those they arrested. The thick-headedness of a mountaineer amused them. What they didn't get in bribes, they could take by cheating him when they resumed the game of *ko-mi* they had quit when their food arrived.

This they set out to do with their greasy deck of cards. Dutifully Kirby tried to "catch the nine." It was easy to lose a few rupees and so keep the soldiers from looting his basket. He didn't want them to gorge themselves too early. The sweetmeats contained enough opium to drug the entire pack, but for this to happen too soon would be conspicuous, and might attract the attention of passersby.

Torches, and the whanging of gongs interrupted the monotony of two hours of losing enough to keep the guard amused. Despite the distance, Kirby recognized Pierre Lecoin, riding toward the quarter where the Pangyet Wun lived. Since there was not a temporary stage there for a *pwe* or puppet show, he could not help but conclude that the two would have a further conference about the treaty. Something important must be culminating, otherwise Lecoin would not be making a second visit that very day.

Kirby dropped his cards and said to the gamesters, *"Thwa-daw-mi*—honored sir, I take my leave." And he was on the way before any of them answered, *"Thwa-ba."*

If they thought anything at all concerning the notions of a wildman, they'd figure he hoped to learn about his missing brother from someone in attendance on the foreigner. Kirby took a shortcut and joined the tail of the procession, unnoticed. This secured him against being picked up by police patrols.

Unobserved, he entered the Pangyet Wun's compound, and edged into the shadow of a clump of plantains. The torch bearers found spots where they hunkered down to chew, chat, or doze. Lecoin, going up from the steps, was reaching into his coat pocket for a sheaf of papers. That much was clear by the lamps brought from within to light his way. The Pangyet Wun came to the door to meet his visitor.

Kirby made a guess as to where the two would confer. He skirted the palisade until he found shadows to cover his dash for the space beneath the house.

Though the scraping of chairs and the sound of hard heels guided him, eaves-

dropping proved useless. The minister, having spent a dozen years in Europe, spoke French as well as English. Kirby could not understand a word. He'd been so accustomed to addressing both Lecoin and the Pangyet Wun in English that he'd overlook the probability of their using French.

Kirby waited. The drums of a police patrol warned him that he'd better stay put until he could leave with Lecoin's escort. He considered following Lecoin right to his home, or to the consulate where his chief, whether ill or merely unwilling, from reasons of prestige, to deal with a mere minister instead of directly with the king, might be waiting for a report. The chance to snatch the documents tempted him.

Then he considered the opium loaded sweetmeats. He could not hope to drug the guards a second time. Shwe Tha came first.

He worked his way back toward the broad leaved plantains in the corner near the gate. The porter was nodding. Though Lecoin's retinue was silent, the glowing ends of cheroots showed that some still stayed awake.

Crouching in darkness, Kirby picked up a piece of bamboo, one of those to which shrubs had been tied until they got their growth. He took the yard long stick mainly to fill his hands as he debated whether he'd stayed away from the guardhouse too long. Having followed a characteristic impulse, he was now, just as characteristically, beginning to brood about the idiotic risk he had run.

The stick, however, ended by giving him new hope.

He had barely realized its possibilities when Lecoin, lighted by one of the house servants, came to the verandah. Kirby moved quickly and silently. Before the Frenchman could arouse his retainers, the perfect moment had arrived.

Behind Lecoin there was now darkness. In the further corner of the compound were cheroot smoking *sayce,* pony, and bearers with extinguished torches. The moon was not high enough for good vision. Kirby thrust out his bamboo, tripping Lecoin as he stepped to the second tread from the ground.

A thump, a gasp, an exclamation of annoyance. These were cut short when Kirby pounced in as if to help. He cried "*Amé!*" in finely feigned dismay, as might any servant of the Pangyet Wun. He gave his man a chop across the base of the brain, using the edge of his hand.

It was a knockout. He had clipped the Frenchman clean and hard. Kirby called, "Give a hand!" to the men who, aroused, were already off their haunches.

Before they could get near, he grabbed the thick sheaf of papers from Lecoin's inside coat pocket. He got up, raising the stunned Frenchman, and using him as a screen against dangerously close observation. When Lecoin's own men came up, the master was neatly shoved into their arms.

"Wait, wait!" Kirby gasped, as though he had another important contribution.

He ducked back. If the puzzled men had any thought, it was that the Pangyet Wun's servant had gone to get help. Once clear of the disconcerted retainers, Kirby raced through shadow and to the compound gate. No one was there but the porter. Kirby shook him, gestured, and cried, "Go help, help!"

Half asleep, the fellow accepted the suggestion. He went to Lejoin Lecoin's men, still busy with the master who had apparently knocked himself out by falling down a flight of stairs. Light showed again on the verandah. Their chatter had aroused the Pangyet Wun.

KIRBY slipped through the gate, and ducked into a narrow street. If Lecoin did regain his wits sufficiently to miss the document, there would be some minutes wasted searching among the shrubbery. Kirby felt as though he walked on clouds. Once more, he had in a few moments swung from futility to a high peak of accomplishment. He was all alert, more alive than normal. One more stroke as neat, as deft, and he'd have the world on a downhill pull!

Then he saw the glow to his right front, a few blocks distant. Fire had broken out. Remembering the affair at San Ya's home, he went cold from apprehension. His first urge was to hide before the walled city swarmed with soldiers and police. He heard yells, shrieks, hoarse shouts, screams in the pitch of uttermost agony. There were many voices, all at once.

"Hundreds of 'em!" was what flashed

through Kirby's mind. "No fire could turn out so many in such a short time."

The patrols could not possibly have arrived so soon. There were no shots, no gongs, no drums. Another oddity—then Kirby knew what had happened: the jail must be afire. Shwe Tha, with all the others, were trapped in their stocks.

Abandoning all caution, Kirby ran. Coming out in the next street, he got a view of what was going on, and knew well why no crowd had gathered. Soldiers with bayonets and police with heavy bladed *dahs* were stabbing and chopping the prisoners as they broke out through the doorway.

How they had got loose was beyond his imagining. Now they had the choice of burning alive, or of being cut down. This was a new and horrible version of "killed while attempting to escape."

A freakish wind held the flames low, and drove smoke down, so that it billowed into the street. Escaping prisoners and the semicircle of executioners surged and shifted, black figures against the glow. Smoke obscured all but the glare, and the glint of blades. It was butchery in silhouette.

The spectacle shocked Kirby so that he went numb, and could endure anything, do anything. In a moment of hesitation, he had the urge to draw his .38 and take the butchers from the rear, shooting his way through the line. Since he could not buck the frenzied outpouring of prisoners, he got a grip on himself.

Weapon drawn, he made for the killers. They were too busy with what faced them to have any concern for their rear. This cost one of them a pistol whipping, and perhaps his life. When the man fell, Kirby had a blood-dripping *dah*. He went with a surge of the assassins until, trampling over dead and wounded, he was close to the guardhouse.

Kirby pounced to the half-wall. From there it was easy to scramble to the roof of the blazing jail. With heavy bladed chopper, he pried and hacked through the roof. Smoke gushed. He dropped into the heat and stench.

Some, struggling with the bonds which secured their ankles, screamed when they saw him. They did not know whether he had come to kill or to liberate. But for the impact of so much which was beyond all his experience and imagining, Kirby would have bogged down in confusion, unable to help the dozens and the scores menaced by flame, and driven nonetheless to try to help. What he saw, heard, and especially what he smelled, tightened him, and robbed him of any humanity except toward Shwe Tha.

Sparks and flame lashed at him, and drew back from him. Choking, coughing, eyes watering, he went toward the end where Shwe Tha had been. He found him in a stupor of exhaustion and terror. Kirby made quick slashes with his *dah*.

He lifted the old man to his feet. He shook him, spoke to him to revive his will to live.

He released others who were not beyond help. He hacked an upright, and chopped a crossbar of bamboo. He pretended to himself that this would enable them all to escape by hitching along until their bonds slipped free of the bar. He had to sell himself something of the sort before he could turn his back on them and tend to his job.

As Kirby and Shwe Tha made their way to the entrance, escaping prisoners pressed back. For the moment, the menace of *dah* and bayonet from the front was more immediate than that of flames from the rear. Kirby hacked more stocks to pieces.

He thrust the chunks of bamboo into the hands of captives. He yelled, he pointed. A stick, a stave, anything to fill the hand, would make it easier for them to face the armed felons who waited outside.

They moved forward again. Kirby said to Shwe Tha, "They'll break a hole in the line. We'll go through. Here, take this!"

But Shwe Tha refused the heavy blade. "The Lord Buddha forbade killing. I do not want the *kan* of a slayer."

Now that he had avoided advancing fire, nothing seemed to make any difference to the elder statesman. He was much more calm than Kirby.

"Follow me, then!"

They went with the next wave. Half crouched, Kirby picked his moment. Those with lengths of bamboo charged, pitting those poor weapons against steel. Yet they broke a hole in the circle of slayers.

Parrying with his *dah* to protect his left, Kirby got busy with the pistol in his right. He hosed the sweating butchers with .38's.

He blasted a gap two yards wide, and hurdled the men he had shot down. Other prisoners followed in his trace. These, running afoul of armed men, made the distraction Kirby needed, and blocked the pursuit he feared. Smoke swallowed him and Shwe Tha. In a moment, they had won temporary safety.

"By degrees," Kirby cackled, thinking of Shwe Tha's maxim, "we'll make it."

The horror and danger which kept people indoors made the way easy until they neared the southwest gate. There they crouched for rest, since Shwe Tha was about to collapse from exertion. Kirby did not feel any too steady himself. He could not think.

He was not equal to outracing any alarm he might cause by rushing the guards; and his pistol was empty.

"Something burns yonder," Shwe Tha said. "Fire in the *kala* section."

Kirby groaned before realizing that the blaze beyond the wall was in a quarter far from where the Fentons lived. "Some factory going up in smoke. What happened at the jail, how did it start, the break and everything?"

"Some were turned loose. The jailers had been bribed, but when the turned loose captives went out, they knew they had been tricked. Either the jailer took payment and then killed them at the door, or there was not the big enough paying to please him. How fire started, I do not know. I think from outside."

This made sense. Fire and revolt were so tightly linked in the Burmese official's mind that there simply had to be a blaze in order to give convincing evidence that there had been an uprising of prisoners; that the massacre had been necessary to prevent a wholesale jail delivery. Politics again; the equivalent of the massacre, within the palace, seven years previous.

Kirby, becoming uneasy as he recovered from letdown, got on his feet and helped Shwe Tha. Helplessly, he regarded the bloody *dah,* and said, as though wiping out a sentry detachment would be easy work, "I can't clean them up without making a lot of noise."

"Back yonder," the old man said, "you and I died. We can not die again. Let me show you."

SLOWLY, in full view, he walked. It was as though during his many months in a monastery, many more than the minimum which every Burmese youth spends to win acceptance as a human being, he had learned the way a *pongyi* moved; a pace not designated as "walking," but as "pacing with dignified gait."

"Put up your sword," he commanded, and Kirby obeyed.

As they approached the gate, Kirby became less and less sure that a man could not die a second time in one night. He felt nakedly exposed in the growing moonlight.

And while horrified Mandalay held its breath indoors, many must be watching from cover. They were right at the gate when the worst came to Kirby; no Burmese ever willingly left by the accursed *amingala.* Dead giveaway!

One of the sentries challenged. Kirby drew a deep breath and wondered, as he poised himself, whether he would deal a knockout with the flat of his blade, or whether he'd better slash and make it good.

"Who goes there?"

Shwe Tha answered, "We two have died, so we walk by the *amingala.*"

Continuing to "pace with dignified gait," Shwe Tha passed the man, and without waiting for permission. Kirby followed steadily as limp knees permitted. In a few moments, they had the fifty yard width of the moat behind them, and all the slaughter and the shrieking; but the stench of burning flesh followed them on the wind.

When the wind shifted finally, the scent of the fire in the distance came to them. It was clean. Nothing but wood fed that fire, and while there was shouting, it was the honest uproar of a mob having its fun, pillaging and destroying.

"That is Mr. Fenton's factory," Shwe Tha said, speaking for the first time since leaving the walled city.

This observation jarred Kirby back to reality. Questions came to life. "Why were you in jail? Why'd they massacre all those people they were going to bury under the walls?"

"Obviously," Shwe Tha answered, "persons put to death cannot be buried alive. Manifestly, we were imprisoned for some other purpose. Our enemies, perhaps.

Clearly, my influence is waning. Or, possibly someone considered it too strong."

This gave Kirby a new problem. Where he had expected that the mere liberation of Shwe Tha would be an end in itself, through publicizing that the venerable statesman had been picked by astrologers for burial, and so arousing public sentiment, he had instead liberated his father's friend only to acquire a new problem—that of safeguarding him.

A faked calamity was the ideal way of liquidating politically undesirable people, when there were so many of them, whereas the survivors of the mass murder could be disposed of by individual assassination.

Kirby had scarcely made this clear when Shwe Tha announced, "I go to the monastery where I studied as a boy. There I find sanctuary."

"I wish I had such an easy way."

"Come with me, for you also is protection."

"I'm no Buddhist."

"The ignorant ones among us call you 'foreign animals,' but the right minded know that the Lord Buddha held that all men are human, even though not enlightened."

As they paralelled the western flank of the walled city, Kirby saw that it had indeed been Fenton's factory which had gone up in flames. By the time they turned to make their way toward the monastery, Kirby had too many other thoughts to keep his mind on sanctuary. He was thinking not only of the Fentons, but also of the documents he had taken from Lecoin.

At the end of a walk of little more than a mile and a half, during which time they encountered neither citizens nor police, Kirby took off his sandals and entered the courtyard of the monastery. Somewhere, monks intoned a ritual. A moment later, he met the abbot, and stood the appraisal of the man who regarded him by the light of a taper.

His head was shaved clean. His eyebrows had been shaved off. His eyes were dark, and deep, and calm as his face, which was thin yet without being withered. His right shoulder, bared by the drape of his yellow robe, was smooth. When Shwe Tha knelt, Kirby followed suit. It seemed natural, not as personal reverence, but as token of acceptance of the calmness, the welcome, the serenity of the holy precincts.

"Does this man wish to become human?" the Abbot asked.

Shwe Tha explained, "You have only to shave your head and put on a yellow robe, in the way of any other novice. Your beliefs are your own. You have only to live the life, until you wish to leave. Just as every Burmese boy does, perhaps for a year, perhaps only for a few months. Thereby, he wins manhood and humanness: whereas until then, he had been only an animal that could become human if it would."

"Will the offer be good later?"

"It will be good. But not if you carry on any sort of work such as tonight, or any other kind of work. You must totally quit the world."

Kirby said, "My lord's servant kowtows with the forehead."

The abbot gave him permission to leave, and Kirby went. It was possible that Alexander Fenton did not even know that his factory had been set afire. The horrible story of the jail burning could easily have overwhelmed any smaller event.

Then, Kirby wished to find out what manner of documents he had taken. Diane read French readily.

When he got to the Fenton compound, the porter was asleep. Before the fellow was sufficiently awake to ask questions, Kirby had shaken him into a mood to obey and not talk. Then Ah Lok heard, and came to investigate.

He bobbed his head, gestured, and led the way into the house.

Kirby followed. The light leaking from drawn blinds was cheery. It was good to be among friends for a little while at least. If indeed he had taken a draft of a treaty, his next move would be a hard and hazardous one, the long road to Rangoon.

He stepped into the vestibule.

Men seized him, coming from right and left. For a queer moment, he fancied that Fenton's servants were getting ready to eject an intruding Kaw mountaineer. Then he knew that he had blundered into a trap. Even so, he shouted, "Alex, call these fools off, it's me!"

There was no answer. Wholly unprepared for anything but friendliness, welcome, relief from tension, he was overpowered be-

fore he could even think of resistance. Wiry, muscular little men swarmed about him, seizing him at once by the arms and legs. Their combined force and weight left him nothing for defense. There was little speech; only gasps and grunts, as of the exhaust of a smoothly turning steam engine. They worked as a machine.

Before he knew it, he was trussed up, lashed to a bamboo pole, all ready to be carried to whatever was his destination. Wherever he was bound, it could not be good. Having in his possession the document taken from Pierre Lecoin would not make things better.

Kirby did not know which hurt the most, failure, or Ah Lok's treachery; but as they carried him away, he forgot even that query, from asking instead what had come upon Diane and her father. The burning of the Fenton factory might have been only the trifling advertisement of something infinitely worse that had happened to its owner.

VIII

ONCE past the second wall of Thebaw's palace, the porters went among towering *pyathats,* and past deep colonnades. The entire place, nearly a quarter of a mile on each side, sat on a platform of brick, ten feet high. By moonlight, all was splendid and mysterious, until Kirby was dumped into a cell, shut off from all sight, and surrounded by fear and odors.

He had unpleasant speculations as to whether this might not be one of the vaults in which victims were buried alive. He wasn't sure whether they were simply walled in, or whether a cornerstone was dropped into place to flatten them. Luckily, he was neither shackled nor put in stocks. They had disarmed him, and had taken his papers, and his bulky knot of silver and copper coin, overlooking the gold pieces.

In the morning, guards brought rice and water. This told Kirby that no friends of his would be notified to bring him food, and that his captors considered him useful enough to be fed.

Though little light could get down through the approach to the cell, he heard voices in the gardens not far away, and music; perhaps Thebaw's hellion of a queen, the Supaya-lat, and her attendants and ladies in waiting were amusing themselves. Gongs sounded, and monks intoned a ritual. Services, possibly, for the Divine White Elephant, the Sinbyudaw, whose exalted stable was somewhere in the rat's nest of a palace. Somewhere, in the gardens from which came music and the song of many birds, were trenches in which had been buried seventy-odd kinsmen of the king, after that notable massacre. From elephant stables to graveyard, the walls surrounding the Lion Throne contained all that Thebaw required.

Later, "spotted men" came to get Kirby, and to deal with him. These felons took orders from the same man who had ushered Kirby, some days previously, into Thebaw's presence. The Pangyet Wun, slender and graceful in his long tunic with golden buttons, nodded and smiled amiably as they hustled Kirby into the well from which his and other cells opened.

This man was an adept at carrying water on both shoulders. When Thebaw's father had asked him on his return from twelve years in Europe whether the foreign animals had palaces, the Pangyet Wun had tactfully answered, "Divinity, they have no teak forests, how can they build palaces?"

For all his smoothness, there was little cause to think that it would be easy dealing with him. Spotted men stood by with rattans to flog the prisoner; others were ready with swords to lop off his head.

"Sit down," said the Pangyet Wun, after seating himself on the mat which an attendant spread for him. "We have things to discuss."

"Such as?" Kirby asked, guardedly.

"Last night's jail break. You had a hand in it."

"I did hear of it. It was quite a piece of work, for one man. For a foreigner evading arrest, and worried about his own troubles. Is it reasonable to ask me or suspect me?"

"You are an unusually competent man," the Pangyet Wun retorted, appreciatively. "Alone, coming into my compound and robbing Pierre Lecoin. Cleverly done, sir. For some minutes, he could not understand how such a short fall could have stunned him so thoroughly. We hunted his papers until it occurred to him to ask about the servant who had helped him to his feet.

There was no such servant, which set us thinking. So we bagged you at Fenton's, using your own neat touch. You had important papers."

"I thought they were important," Kirby answered. "So much so that it seems not at all reasonable to believe I'd turn from there to amuse myself with a jail delivery."

"There was a Kaw mountaineer inquiring for his missing brother," the Pangyet Wun went on. "Later, it was learned that guards had been drugged. Jail delivery is a capital crime. So is robbery with violence —I refer to the matter of Pierre Lecoin."

Kirby went glib and brazen. "I am unarmed, outnumbered. You are in good company—I don't think any of your men but has not done his share of killing. Experts, all of them."

The Governor of the Glass Manufactories could not be angered. "According to our laws," he explained, "we can not pass or execute sentence on a man not arrested in the act, or clearly accused by witnesses. Unless he should first repent, and confess."

"Won't the guards identify me?"

"They were beheaded for sleeping on post. Someone was hasty, short tempered. Caught in the act, you see. Confession not required."

"A Kaw looking for his brother," Kirby said, "should let me out. You know who and what I am."

The Pangyet Wun rolled a chew, and politely offered Kirby the betel box. "That is precisely so—I do know what you are. A spy working for the British. And in that jail was a man once high at court. Specifically, Shwe Tha, friend of the British. And your friend, and your father's friend. Where is Shwe Tha?"

"There was a general massacre," Kirby countered. "And judging from the smell, a good many people burned with the jail. The odds are all in favor of his having been roasted."

"I hope most earnestly he has not," was the Pangyet Wun's sincere affirmation. "But I must know. Your work as a spy makes it important for us to know just how far Shwe Tha went in his friendship for British and American people."

"I'm no spy."

"Why take Mr. Lecoin's documents?"

"I'm sure he was responsible for that 20,000 rupee fine. See here, if I were a spy, wouldn't I have hurried down the river with my loot, instead of going straight to Fenton's?"

"Who were not at home," the Pangyet Wun remarked, sympathetically. "Possibly they'd got the news, and were concerned by the burning of their factory."

"Possibly," Kirby admitted casually; he refused to snap at the bait intended to make him ask for news of them.

"Better tell me of your spying. The British won't do a thing for you now. They can't."

"This was a personal matter between me and Lecoin. He and I had quarrelled. About Diane Fenton. He is in a position to have my 20,000 rupee fine doubled. Have my business confiscated outright. It was very odd that he'd call on you both afternoon and evening. He's only a secretary."

"The French consul is ill. Mr. Lecoin is acting for him. What you stole was the final draft of a treaty between his government and mine. That fact makes your position far more serious than would be the case if you'd merely indulged in purely private *dacoity.*"

Kirby didn't like what he saw behind the pleasant face. The malignant Taingda—Mingyi could think only in terms of violence, mass butchery; this man had a broader range and a longer vision. He could and would do anything which Thebaw's hatchetman was capable of, and much more in addition.

Without command, some of the spotted men had ascended the stairs leading from the well, and were busy on the platform level, in one of the many small courts which contributed to the palace maze. They were setting three bamboo stakes in the ground. To these they lashed, ladder-wise, three cross pieces of bamboo. When this was done, they arranged two more lengths to form an "X," secured to the ladder.

"Handy, aren't they?" the Pangyet Wun remarked, appreciatively.

THE device was something familiar to anyone who had ever steamed up the Irrawaddi, or ridden through a village where a band of *dacoits* had been rounded up. All that the assembly of bamboos lacked to make it complete was the body of a

malefactor, tied securely to it with rattan withes.

When they crucified you in Burma, you stayed fixed to the "X" shaped cross till you fell apart, or the scavenger birds picked you bare. Generally, the executioner gave the spread-eagled culprit a slash across the stomach with a *dah*, or maybe a couple of spear thrusts.

"Handy chaps," the Pangyet Wun continued, and made a winning little grimace of appreciation of craftmanship which he himself could not hope to equal." Why not be frank?" He eyed Kirby, appealingly, and winked, giving his head a birdlike twist. *"Hok de?"*

Hok de: right you are, old cockie! Let's be friends, it's nicer that way.

Kirby almost responded, because the man was so persuasive. He came very near answering, *"Hok de!"* Instead, he countered, "You say I stole a treaty draft. It's written in French, which I can't read. I wanted Diane Fenton to read it to me, so I'd know what Lecoin was building up against me. She went to school—I didn't."

The Pangyet Wun nodded understandingly. "King Thebaw calls you foreign animals, and King Thebaw insists on considering an American to be a Britisher. Mindon Min, his very wise father, did not know you people as I do. Because he sat on the Lion Throne, while I lived among English and French. Even Mindon Min did not know how your tribe is cunning while pretending to be stupid, and strong while pretending to be weak. But in London and in Paris and in Rome, I lived your lives and I know you. Your father before you got a teak concession from Mindon Min—and now you work this lease—a stupid thing, chopping down trees, when in your land, you build palaces of granite, ships of steel, and locomotives. A stupid man, we Burmese say. But I do not say so. Tell me, British agent, what they sent you to learn, and what they plan to do with the knowledge. Perhaps you'd then not be crucified."

"What would I know, up there in my logging camp?"

"You went to Rangoon, and finally came back."

"I went because of my father's death in the States. You know that."

"I know nothing except you were gone, and you returned. You must know what the British are thinking and planning."

"About what?"

"About 'Chinese' Gordon, General Charles George Gordon—killed in Khartoum, with all his army—this, nearly ten months ago. You have lost face until you avenge him. When will this be?"

The question put Kirby in a fantastic position. British disasters in Zululand, the murder of a British envoy in Afghanistan, the massacre of an Egyptian army commanded by a British general in Khartoum, all made a spearhead to prod him. If he said that the British would not avenge Gordon, Thebaw's ministers would go on a rampage more daring than ever before. If he said that Gordon would be avenged, the Burmese dignitaries would feel free to go wild in a new, large way, on the assumption that attacking any enemy powerful enough to capture Khartoum would be a task leaving no forces free for Burma.

Whichever way he answered, he would be inviting violence for whatever English, and what Americans, mainly Baptist missionaries, still remained in Upper Burma.

"I don't know."

The Pangyet Wun clapped his hands. A blow from the rear knocked Kirby to his face. Though conscious, he was unable to break his fall. The spotted men pounced on him. They swarmed, handy and agile and muscular, to lash him to the bamboo frame.

The rattan withes bit into his wrists and into his ankles. His hands and feet went numb from the constriction. Unhappily, the numbness did not spread. He was sure that his arms would be wrenched from their sockets. His legs went into a hopeless battle of straining when he tried to make them support some of his weight. Surely they should be able to ease the pull on his shoulders, since the bonds held his ankles all too securely; but whatever support he must have had, it did him no good at all, gave him no comfort.

His effort only increased the tension, and sharpened the pains which crept up his legs, to center in the small of his back. The stab and burn which originated in his neck and shoulders moved downward to meet the upward rising misery.

This was something one couldn't get used to.

He hope exhaustion would bring total numbness, and feared it would not.

Due to his elevation, the sun furnished much heat, and no shade at all. Hours later, the shadow of a *pyathat* would bring relief. Already, he was drenched with sweat. His throat and lips were dry.

Serenely, indifferently, Kirby's captors sat in a cool spot in the angle of the wall. The Pangyet Wun kept somewhat apart from those outcasts who awaited his orders.

All the flies, all the buzzing insects, all the gnats of Burma crowded to the prey which could not avoid, or slap them. At last the Pangyet Wun got up, mustered his men, and said, "We'll be back later. I hope you'll have answers for me. Really, I don't like this at all."

IX

KIRBY was still conscious, though without knowing why, when the woman ventured into the small court. After an uneasy glance over her shoulder, she hurried toward the cross. She was little more than five feet tall, a dainty handful, and moving so recklessly that the edges of her "dog tooth" *tamein* parted much higher than it should have. The weave and pattern of that wrap-around skirt indicated that she was a lady high at court. She climbed the torture ladder, and so lightly that the cross pieces barely stirred in their lashings.

"Drink," she said, and held a bowl of water to Kirbys lips.

She was smooth and sweet faced, with a small nose, not too wide. She reeked of garlic, sandalwood, and the coconut oil which made her hair gleam splendidly; but to Kirby, the girl was all beauty to every sense.

"Shwe Tha," she whispered as he drank, "told the *pongyis* to find out about you when they went out at sunrise for alms. I live in the palace, but I can't let you loose till tonight, we'd both be killed if I tried it now."

He tried to speak, but could not, yet she guessed the aim of his thick-lipped croaking. "I'm Ma Khin. Hold still, I'll put oil on your face and hands, the sun is bad."

The stuff gave Kirby relief from burn and insect bites. When Ma Khin climbed down, he smelled a peculiar pungent savor and knew it to be the medication in the oil, and not the girl's cosmetics. Despite his almost paralyzed neck, he contrived to twist his head, and get sight of her as she left the court. *Tamein* and jacket were indeed those of a lady in attendance on one of the royal family. This made sense. Shwe Tha still had influence in the palace, else his enemies would have had no need of trying to finish him by fake jail break.

Ma Khin meant, "Miss Lovable." Just that, since the Burmese had no surnames. Her visit and her promise had been a respite and a source of new strength. He tried not to think of the circulation cut off from hands and feet, with the chance that gangrene would develop if his bonds were kept tight long enough.

Presently, the spotted men came back. The Pangye Wun was not with them. They amused themselves by making passes at Kirby's stomach with their *dahs*. They thought it fun to watch him flinch and twitch. Try as he would, he could not control himself as they went through the routine leading finally to a fatal stroke. Whether at a crucifixion or beheading, the spotted men baited the victim before finishing him.

They shouted, laughed, spat betel juice at him.

More and more, Ma Khin became a beautiful unreality from a world which no longer existed.

"Tell your master I'll talk!" Kirby croaked in desperation; had he only known at the start that he had a friend in the palace, he would have given a plausible confession, on the chance that he might get help before they killed him as a spy.

But the torturers didn't understand English. One had a javelin. He gave a sharp, yet nicely controlled prod. Another sheathed his *dah* and reached for the spear. All wanted turns. Being lower even than a foreigner, they hated anyone above them on the scale.

Kirby had little cause to worry about gangrene from stopped circulation. He hoped only that when the ruffians had had their fill of fun, they'd finish the job with a clean sweep. He was surprised that the idea of extinction did not dismay him at all. He shrank only from the painful gateway of death; the *way*, not the destination, was what appalled him. He knew

now what Shwe Tha had meant in his speaking to the guard at the Southwest Gate. Once a man accepted death, he can not ever again be afraid; he can only flinch from pain to the body.

So, having accepted, Kirby was curious, rather than apprehensive, when Pierre came into the court. Though bareheaded and barefooted, as palace etiquette demanded, he made a stately entrance. He carried his stick with an air. Two retainers followed him. They were unarmed. This did not worry Lecoin, or check his indignation, when he saw Kirby.

"Assassins! Cut throats! Sons of a pig and a lewd woman!" He cursed them in French and Burmese, and while they gaped, he set to work with his stick. It fairly hissed as he laid it over rumps and bare backs. Arrogance—coolness—fearlessness—these, and the stinging blows sent them howling and scrambling. Lecoin, ignoring the ruffians, spoke to his attendants, who set to work liberating the victim.

Lecoin locked an arm about Kirby's legs to support him, to take the weight from his arms, while one of the attendants climbed the ladder to free Kirby's wrists. When he lurched forward, utterly helpless, he folded over the Frenchman's shoulder.

Lecoin gave orders as though this had been his, and not Thebaw's palace. His two men carried Kirby, whose wits had been further fogged, rather than cleared, by this strange relief, this high-handed taking over. Kirby had only a vague perception of his surroundings until he was taken into another enclosure which was almost filled by a small house with multiple eaves upturned, carved, and gilded.

The walls were no more than shoulder high. They made the place a cross between house and pavillion. It had several rooms, apparently unoccupied, though on the floor were mats. On one of these they stretched Kirby.

Lecoin made a reassuring gesture. "By God! I will not deal with such barbarians. This is an outrage. Rest easy—all is well—I shall return."

He hurried out, but left one of his attendants with Kirby.

When the Frenchman came back, he brought food, and even some brandy. The Pangyet Wun was with him, amiable as ever. "Your good friend," the latter said, as he seated himself on a mat, "convinced me that there are other ways to win your cooperation. I listened to him. As he says each country has its own ways."

"That is self evident," Lecoin agreed, with dignity rather than coldness.

THE brandy helped a lot. So did the rice and duck and prawns, and also the soup. Eating in Thebaw's palace, within earshot of the Supaya-lat's women, seemed not at all strange to Kirby. When he noted the length of the shadows, he realized that he had not been crucified for anything like the ages it had seemed.

Lecoin continued, "Let us forget our personal difficulties. I shall be frank. You do have a valuable teak concession. There is opposition—as you have noted—to foreigners. Except, of course, the French. You observe, I am well liked in the palace. I could be a most useful partner in business."

Kirby evaded the issue. "They have me here on charges of being a British spy."

"So I learned. How could you clear yourself more readily than by accepting me as a partner? British and French interests do clash—colonial policy against colonial policy—but between individuals, man to man—come, come, I am not a hard loser! A woman's fancies are her own, not so?"

The Pangyet Wun said, "You can help us by telling what is in the official British mind."

"I wish to God I knew!" Kirby exclaimed, and with unfeigned heartiness. "Supposing I were a spy, my job would be to learn things. They'd not be telling me what they knew—they'd be wanting me to get them information."

"Come, come! That is quibbling," Lecoin reproved, as though hurt by such ingratitude. "You must enjoy official confidence. Certainly, you went to the United States, but you spent a good deal of time in Rangoon before you returned."

"Yes. I was making arrangements for handling the teak I hoped to extract. My father had let things slide a lot further than I realized until I took over."

"You talked to many officials."

"Naturally, I did. Big sawmill operators go around in official circles. I was a guest."

Lecoin smiled. "Ah—just so! Just what I

mean. Not a paid spy, no. You must however have got assurance, hope, something not showing on the surface. Otherwise, you'd have been inclined to sell your interest instead of buying out the other heirs, as you did, and taking your father's entire concession."

"You're very well posted, aren't you?"

"As consular aide, knowing things is one's duty, not so?"

"I can't think, not after what I've been through."

"Of course not, not yet," the Frenchman agreed, sympathetically. Then, to the Pangyet Wun, "Possibly you could make Mr. Kirby comfortable. His memory is scattered. From strain, days of strain." Lecoin got up and bowed. "It is not every suspect who is housed in His Golden Majesty's palace. *Au revoir.*"

"Getting cleaned up would help," Kirby suggested, hopefully.

The Pangyet Wun assured him that all this would be taken care of; whereupon he followed Lecoin, and his attendants went with him.

There was no need of watching Kirby. He had nowhere to go. Palace servants and guards would nail him at his first move. Getting into the outer inclosure would merely magnify his problem. His real hope was the mysterious Ma Khin.

He remembered that she'd spoken of obscure places in this Chinese puzzle of a palace; a labyrinth so complex that no one person could possibly know all of it. And then, as he lay there, blanketed and cuddled by his million aches, he tried to see what lay behind Lecoin's moves.

Kirby's teak concession, however good, was nothing unusual, for there were thousands of square miles of virgin forest. While it was clear enough why Lecoin should want Kirby out of business, teaming up with him was something which on the surface offered no profit he could not get elsewhere.

"Chances are," Kirby told himself, finally, "they do think I have an in with the British, and do know something from the inside records, and since half killing me didn't jar me loose from information, he is playing the good fellow."

As a guess, they wanted him to double-cross his supposed employers—an approach typical of both Lecoin and the sly Pangyet Wun.

Kirby settled down to wracking his brains for a convincing way of beating the pair at their own game. He did actually have general information on British policy; he could cook up imaginary details, convincing however misleading in actual fact, at least sufficiently so to win time for Ma Khin's promised help to materialize.

From scraping the bottom of misery, Kirby swooped up, full of power again, and riding high. It was all in his mind; of this, he was keenly aware, yet there was new life and new strength from the very thought of quitting the role of tackling dummy, and instead, counter-attacking.

Presently, servants brought him a jar of water. One had a razor, which he would not leave. However, he stayed and shaved Kirby. Cleaning up did help a lot.

X

DARKNESS fell, and without Lecoin's return, or the Pangyet Wun's. The frightful wrenching and straining Kirby had endured made any thought of flight ridiculous. He was stiffening to total woodenness.

When Ma Khin came so silently into the gloom that cosmetic scent rather than sound warned him, he could barely get up to follow the girl.

Somewhere in the palace, an orchestra was sounding off in an eerie minor key; the pentatonic Burmese scale jarred Kirby. "Puppet show," Ma Khin whispered. "The Golden Lord is there. Everyone else attends."

Despite her assurance, she moved stealthily among the buildings. Some were isolated, others were connected to their neighbors by colonnades. Tomblike, a marble edifice designed by the same Italian as had built the Incomparable Monastery, loomed up. Kirby smelled the blend of stable and sandalwood. They were near the shed of the divine White Elephant. Ahead was a brick building, and a tall wooden tower whose gold leaf overlay gleamed in the darkness. To the left front was an arcaded terrace, and a white stucco pavilion. Most of Thebaw's palace was roofed with corrugated iron.

Ma Khin took him among grottos, watercourses, pools and winding walks of garden after garden. Finally she came to an angle of the wall, into which a wooden tower had been built, as an afterthought, lest there remain an uncluttered spot in this architectural nightmare. The masonry of the wall was pierced by a doorway cunningly concealed by a sliding panel. Originally, it must have been a magazine or store room. Judging from the smell, it had remained unused for a long time. The tower so nearly blocked the approach that the crypt had been rendered quite useless.

Taking his hand, Ma Khin edged into the darkness. "Here's a jar of water, and rice. When they miss you, they'll think you got past the guards at the gate, somehow or other. Once they quit hunting you, I'll get you a soldier's uniform and you can leave when the household troops turn out for review."

She was about to go, when he detained her. "Sit down and tell me something."

Obediently, she snuggled up. "Yes, *paya taga?*"

"Alex Fenton's Number One, the one man I'd trust to the limit, led me right into Fenton's house when he could have warned me. Where are the Fentons?"

"I do not know. All I know is that Lady Ne Htun asked me to find out about Shwe Tha, when she heard about the jail fire. I came to help you because he—they—told me to."

"Lady Ne Htun wanted you to help me?"

"Oh, yes, because you're a friend of Shwe Tha, and he's a friend of her family."

"Is he really safe in the monastery?"

"As long as no one, none of the wrong people know he is there." After a moment's silence, she went on, "It is *possible* to find a spotted man so reckless he would risk a million million years in the Eighth Hell for killing a man in a monastery. So, silence is best."

"Are they going to bury so many people under the walls?"

"The astrologers want it that way, but Thebaw is afraid there will be an uprising. They have found only a hundred people, so far, whose birthdays are right, for bringing luck. Maybe those will be enough."

"They're in the palace?"

"In the dungeons. Waiting, getting food and everything they need. They have to be alive until the right time."

WHEN she left, he settled down to worrying about Diane and her father. It was odd, unreasonable that in rumor-infested Mandalay there had not been hour to hour reports about them as about all other foreigners. The spies who watched everyone gossiped until stories spread and finally came to the foreigners themselves. Uneasiness made the safety of the crypt an intolerable confinement. The music told him that for awhile yet he'd have the run of the palace. If he hobbled around, he might find some way of escaping before the monthly review, which was held a day or two after the full moon.

Kirby knew one thing about the palace which gave point to his venture. To safeguard law and order, the king kept concentrated in the palace all the firearms which came into Upper Burma; all, that is, which he could seize and confiscate. Thus, whoever held the palace had the keys to the kingdom. There were stands of arms in every throne room and in every audience hall. There were many arsenals as well.

He hobbled out, edging along the wall. He paused from time to time to get his bearings. Presently, Kirby was in one of the royal pavilions.

Moonrise at once made his task easier, and more dangerous. In the half light, he caught the glint of gold leaf, and the glint of gun barrels, and of lances and *dahs*. The firearms were as antiquated as the gold-plated cannon which decorated the approach to the main throne room. With a *jezail*, a *jingal*, or a Tower musket he could do nothing except impersonate a soldier, a task which required a uniform.

Matchlock—flintlock—percussion lock—these were useless even if he could find powder and ball. He wanted a hand gun, and a modern one; something which could throw enough lead in a few seconds to start a first rate panic. Although brave and ferocious fighters, indifferent to pain or death, those same Burmese would stampede if taken by surprise. Unpredictably, they would switch from reckless valor to hysteria, just as they did from gentleness to barbarity.

There were hand guns, at least a few, since no one in Upper Burma except a

trustworthy official, "eating" a district, was ever allowed to keep what firearms he might smuggle in; and there was no end to smugglings and seizures. Kirby went to another pavilion, where he found muskets with barrels home fabricated of gas pipe. As with the villager who had made the crazy thing, so with Thebaw; a gun was a gun, however more dangerous to the man firing it than to the target.

IT WAS not until out of sheer disgust and weariness that made him poke about in cabinets, and in the clutter of European bric-a-brac which the Burmeses called beauty, that he stumbled across a double action Colt .32. In the chambers were four cartridges, somewhat corroded. Though the weapon was rusting under the dab of oil applied to it, long ago, the bore was clear enough.

With his prize he turned to retrace his course. Movement loosened the stiffness of strained muscles. Prowling, he realized, had been better than remaining huddled in the crypt.

Light in a small kiosk not far away brought him to an abrupt stop. Whoever was in the latticed inclosure must have urgent business to keep him from attending the royal puppet show. Kirby could not begin to guess which of the many palace intrigues might be culminating only a few yards from him. However, every current and counter-current in the palace, except such as concerned purely local rivalries, affected European interests. The speech was French. There was no effort to keep it subdued.

"Let well enough alone," was Kirby's judgment, all the more so since he could not understand a word.

However, he could not resist the urge to investigate.

Painfully, he wormed his way close enough to get a look through the carved screen of the wall. Lecoin and the Pangyet Wun sat on gilded chairs, at a gilded table. A kerosene bracket lamp lighted them, and the documents they discussed. There was an inkwell, pen rack, and a stylus for writing Pali script. Most significant of all were the seals the two had at hand; one, European style, the other, a Burmese "chop," implying that the Pangyet Wun had for the time at least the power of acting for King Thebaw.

This was something whose importance was clear without any knowledge of French. Kirby stepped in. The two jerked about at the sound. The click of cocking the pistol checked their motion. They settled, though rigidly, back in their chairs.

"Keep your hands on the table."

The Pangyet Wun said, "We are not armed. Carrying weapons in the palace without authority is a capital offense."

"Making a move without my authority," Kirby retorted, "is a capital offense."

"What do you want?" Lecoin demanded. "I had intended coming to see you as soon as this business was settled. Please put up that pistol. Your attitude is insane. What the devil! Haven't I gone a long way in friendliness, good will, understanding? What does this mean?"

"To get out of here. You two will arrange it. If anything happens to me on the way out, you are both dead ducks. The way I figured your good will, it was a put up job, that fine rescue party you staged, to get me in the right and grateful mood. So I am getting out."

Neither the Frenchman nor the Governor of the Glass Manufactories was alarmed. Rather, they were annoyed and irritated. Kirby, for all his advantage, realized that he had grabbed a tiger by the tail. He was all right until he had to let go.

Lecoin continued, "How far beyond the palace do you think you could go?"

While that was a question which would indeed take some answering, the tone encouraged Kirby. "When we're outside, I'll tell you. Don't move."

He scooped up the papers. Risking the flick of an eye, he noted that they had been signed and sealed. This was worth any reasonable amount of crucifying.

"You don't want to go through with this," the Frenchman said, earnestly. "Please believe me, you do not really want what is bound to happen as a consequence."

"I'll be the judge of that. Let's go, before the music ends."

The Pangyet Wun flashed a glance at Lecoin, as though looking to him for leadership. Nor did the Frenchman fail. He said, "Kirby, in taking official papers, you are moving against France, not against me. Up until this moment, you and I have had difficulties of a purely personal matter. Con-

cerning which I bore you no grudge, or have you forgotten? Or can you doubt I was moved by kindly impulses, from one foreigner to another foreigner in a strange land?"

"Maybe it was not a staged play to crack me. Maybe I have been unjust," Kirby conceded. "Personally, I am grateful to you, regardless of your motives. But this affects me and all other Europeans who are in the same boat as I'm in."

Lecoin nodded understandingly. "You proposed using us to force a safeguard from the palace, perhaps also from Mandalay, and as much further as your luck could carry you. Not so?"

"That's it," Kirby admitted, cheerily. "No help for it."

"Then here is a cake for your loaf, my friend. Faithful old Ah Lok had to trap you instead of warning you. Because the Fentons, father and daughter, were in a dangerous position. Their safety had to be bought at any cost, his first loyalty was to them. So he did as he was ordered. Is it now clear what I mean when I say that I and the Burmese government can make as good use of hostages as you hope that you might?"

Kirby, though unable to conceal how he had been shocked by Lecoin's revelation and counterthreat, would not at once surrender. Instead, he demanded, "Am I to understand that because Diane finally got tired of you, you are capable of threatening her life?"

"For France, if it is necessary," Lecoin answered, soberly. "The issue is no longer under my control. It has become Burmese business, not merely French. I may well find myself in the position of trying to save them, and failing."

The Pangyet Wun said, "The lady's father, the friend of your own father, is not protected by Mr. Lecoin's natural sentiment. Please lay down your weapon."

The two were not bluffing. Ah Lok's treachery could not have been compelled except by genuine danger to the Fentons. Yet the surrender of the pistol would for Kirby amount to the resignations of his life.

Lecoin sighed. "It is neither me, nor you, nor the Pangyet Wun; it is circumstance that commands us all."

"Where are they?"

"At the British Residency. Where they are for the time protected against the lawless element which burned the factory. They're in danger enough already. If the situation becomes any worse, they may have to find safety in the French consulate. But having harbored you, a spy, their presence would put me in a false position. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes. I am to give you this pistol to buy their heads."

"Not as simple as you make it, no. I have here another document. In my pocket. One I intended to discuss with you, when I had done with the business you have interrupted. May I reach for it? I am not armed."

"Reach for it, let me see it."

Lecoin took several folded sheets from his pocket, paused a moment, offered them to Kirby. The move was made with the suggestion, *"Here you are, take them."* Kirby almost reached, but caught himself in time. "Put it on the table!"

Lecoin grimaced ruefully, amused by his failure, and candidly admitting he'd failed. "It would serve our purposes far better," he said, "for you to leave for Rangoon and reach your destination safely, than for you to disappear. Incidents to Britishers and to their friends is something which this government prefers to avoid."

"He is right," the Pangyet Wun affirmed. "Unhappily, we do have stubborn and antagonistic officials close to the Golden Presence. Some are rabid, unreasoning in their hatred of the British."

"All right, that paper?"

"That partnership between me and you, in your teak concession. It will have good publicity value," Lecoin explained. "And your value as a spy will drop enormously. They won't trust you any more in Rangoon. Be pleased to sign—after surrendering your pistol."

Kirby laid down his weapon. He picked up a pen, dipped it, and as he signed, he told himself, "Well, Ah Lok had a tough time of it, doing what *he* had to do."

There were two copies, one in English, one in French. As the Pangyet Wun put his witnessing signature on them, Kirby looked around, and let out a deep breath. He'd made a down payment on the safety of the Fentons. He wondered how and when the balance would be collected.

When he heard voices, and looked out

the door, he saw a light. Three men were coming toward the kiosk. Two were Burmese. Between them they had a white man, tall and broad, bareheaded and barefooted. He came willingly enough. By the light of the lantern which one of the escort carried, Kirby recognized Alex Fenton.

The trio stepped into the kiosk as the Pangyet Wun made the final flourish of his pen. Lecoin was leaning forward as if impatient to see the completion of what he had so long planned. Kirby recognized the natives; two spotted men, two of the crew which had trussed him up, and menaced him. But Kirby's was not the only face which had changed.

Before he could speak, Fenton saw him, started violently, and for a heart's beat, seemed to choke for words. One of the spotted men asked, "Where do we put the forcign animal?"

Fenton found words: "You blasted liar! You—you bloody beast! You said you'd let him go to Rangoon—Dan, what'd *you* sign away?"

Fenton's utterance was short enough: but it was hardly completed when Kirby understood all that must have happened. There was no time to grasp the whys of it, nor any need. Nothing counted except that Fenton's surprise, his change from resignation to wrath as he cursed Lecoin, was proof that he, Fenton, must have made a deal comparable to the one which Kirby had just completed.

Since Fenton had been doubled-crossed, Kirby knew that he himself had fared no better. And Fenton's outburst, though only that of an unarmed man under guard, compelled the attention of both the Pangyet Wun and Lecoin for the space of a breath or two. Kirby needed no more time than that.

Treachery completed would lead to more of its like. Of this he was certain. But it was less foreknowledge than Fenton's fury which gave Kirby the final prod to action.

XI

KIRBY snatched the Colt. The two at the table had gone to such effort to convince him that they had hostages to compel his submission that it did not, could not occur to them that Fenton's arrival and his words had put everything back on a man to man basis, as far as Kirby was concerned. They could hardly have realized that the mere sight of two of his torturers would goad him beyond the restraint of reason, or that Fenton's wrath was contagious.

Kirby could not move quickly, but he did not have to. The Frenchman could have beaten him to the weapon, but he did not.

The music sounded off; gongs and drums, rattles and flutes and pipes filled the ears of all near it. The orchestra made a blanket of sound which muffled the thin whack of the .32. Kirby was cool and steady as he could not have been had he taken thought of the moment's risk, and of all the consequences. The range was little more than two yards. He was calm as at target practice.

Before the spotted man at Fenton's right lurched forward, he pistol smacked a second time. A red dot blossomed in the forehead of the other executioner, as a jewel set in a statue of the Buddha. He fell backward, dead before he hit the pavement.

Fenton had stood blinking. Powder flecks had stung his eyes. At the second shot, however, he lunged. Body and voice carried on from where surprise had checked them.

"You bloody scoundrel—"

The Pangyet Wun and Lecoin were on their feet. Kirby turned. He was light headed. He had risen above aches and stiffness. All that stopped him from making a clean sweep with his gunfire was that Fenton's bulk intervened. The Frenchman uncorked a punch. Fenton pulled with it, and delivered one of his own.

The Pangyet Wun yelled. Kirby struck down with the barrel of the pistol. That silenced him. Kirby and Fenton, still too dazed to have caught up with what their hands had done, faced each other, gasping and groping. Automatically, Kirby grabbed the papers, both official and private.

"I signed," Kirby panted, "to save your neck."

"That's why I—" Fenton made a snarling sound, deep in his throat. "Signed—he said you—"

"Where's Diane? In this hell's hole?"

"No. His place."

Each questioned the other with a look which meant, "Now what do we do?"

The spotted man who lay twitching let out a strangled yell. He got up, barged into

the door jamb. On the recoil, he hurdled his companion, the one who looked upward but would never again see anything. Clutching his stomach, he took a staggering step. Kirby cursed and levelled the gun.

He could have seized the wounded torturer, thrown him, pistol whipped him; but Kirby had only one reaction where such a man was concerned. But he was wrong in trying for a moving target, for now that his highly keyed nerves had eased up, he was shaky. He missed, and when he pulled the trigger again, there was only a click. The fourth cartridge was dead as the first three might have been.

He cursed, and flung the weapon fiercely into a corner. Fenton, no longer having to stay out of the line of fire, bounded forward. Kirby blocked him.

"The sun's gone, we're in for it! Let him go."

"Every guard in the place'll be here."

Kirby knocked the chimney from the lamp and blew it out.

"This way, Alex," he said, as he led off. "I've got a spot where we can hide."

Though moonlight was an increasing danger, the landscaping and architecture cast a shadow patchwork which afforded concealment. At what he took to be the first shouts of pursuit, Kirby lunged head-long for one of the small water courses in the garden. With Fenton, he found cover beneath a miniature bridge.

After a breathless moment, he said, "Someone singing."

"Why can't the beggars start!" Fenton demanded, peevishly, as though actually resenting the slowness of organizing a search. "With a bit of hue and cry, one would know what to do next."

"Take it easy, I'll show you."

Kirby crept among lotus pads until he could risk poking his head up far enough to orient himself.

"Here's the Italian tomb—there's the watch tower where no one watches."

THEY waited. The music continued, on and on, in its jangling Mongolian pentatonics. *Plink-plonk-plang—pling-plang-whang*—with the click-click of rattles and the screech of fiddles, and the falsetto of singers to add to the unreality. With no alarm, no pursuit in any quarter, every quarter began to seem dangerous. Remembering how he had barged into Fenton's house, and into a trap, Kirby began to fear the secret crypt on which he had been counting.

"I say," Fenton whispered, after moments of silence, "You drilled that beggar in the chest. Silly ass, might've choked up with blood, from trying to bolt. Drowned in his own blood, you know. I saw the like happen in Pegu, well before your time."

"Oh, damn Pegu!" Kirby snapped. Then, after creeping through transparent shadow and into secure cover, he said, "A tap on the head wouldn't keep the Pangyet Wun out this long. Don't tell me you killed Lecoin with your bare hands, though I hope you did."

"Merely clouted him a crisp one. When he dropped, I'd've kicked him neatly in the stomach, but the leg of a chair spoiled that. Scoundrel should be turning out the guard by now."

"LET'S make for that tower. Whatever's happened, there can't be an alarm, so far. Ever see these monkeys take up a chase without a lot of noise?"

It seemed that in Pegu, Fenton had encountered such an oddity. Kirby gritted his teeth, then got up to dart for the shadow of the tower. When they were both wedged between tower and wall, he fumbled for the panel.

He couldn't find it.

"Good God!" he groaned. "Can't be the wrong place."

"If your open sesame won't open, we're in an awkward spot." Fenton sniffed. "Elephants, by Jove."

"I left it open—" Muttering and fumbling, Kirby broke into a sweat. Once more, the recollection of his experience with Ah Lok shook him. "I know this is it. Just in case—I mean, if I run into something—you stand clear, and get away, understand?"

"I'll clout him. Carry on."

Then the panel yielded, and without a sound. Sandalwood, coconut oil, patchouli, garlic, and betel bouquet filled Kirby's nostrils. "No noise, no noise," a woman cautioned. "I came looking for you, then waited here."

The two lurched into the scented gloom. The panel slid shut behind them. Fenton

said, "Cozy, feminine touch and all. Who is she?"

"Ma Khin," the woman answered. "When I heard the shooting, I was worried to death."

"So were we," Kirby said. "See here, you'd better get out, it'd be your finish if you were caught with us."

"Nothing has happened so far," Miss Lovable answered. "So nothing will happen—not at once."

"What's gone on since you left?"

"That woman—the Englishman's daughter—she is at the French consulate. Safe enough. Who is that man with you?"

"Her father."

"Ah—of course."

"What do you mean, *of course?*"

The three compared notes. Fenton's hair trigger reaction at the sight of Kirby had been right. Fenton, led to believe that Kirby was on his way to Rangoon, had signed away his weaving factory to buy for the supposed fugitive total immunity from pursuit.

"Wait a second!" Kirby broke in. "This was *after* the fire. You signed away a factory that'd gone up in smoke?"

"Silly," Fenton answered, "but anything to please the scoundrel. And in Diane's interests, I agreed to go to the palace, as you saw."

"Just as I had signed away my concession."

"Made asses of both of us. Meanwhile, is this young person going to feed us, or must we forage about the palace?"

"Rice and water," Ma Khin said. "Plenty of both."

"When do we leave?"

"That," Kirby answered, glumly, "is a question. Ma Khin was going to get me a uniform, so I could fall in with the troops at review. But you're too big by a mile. Even if you could squeeze into one of their monkey jackets, you'd loom up like an elephant."

"Er—no use leaving in such a hurry, as long as this young lady can find us a bite to eat. Sweet chutney, by all means. And some smoked prawns. I loathe rice undisguised."

"To hell with this talk about chow, you're scared as I am. Got some matches?"

"One of the few things they didn't rob me of. Why?"

"Can you read French?"

"In a small way."

"Get busy then. I want to find out what is in this official paper. Let's all find out. Just in case only one of us gets out."

When the match flamed up, Ma Khin had strips of rattan broken from a hamper. These served as tapers. Frowning and muttering, Fenton studied the documents.

"In the English version," he said, "you signed over, for a good and valuable consideration, to wit, one hundred thousand rupees, receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, all right, title, and interest in such and such concession. In the French version of same, you signed a confession saying you were a spy for Her Majesty's government."

"The double dealing tramp!"

"Oh, quite typical. He had to level off for having allegedly given a good and valuable consideration for a factory that was ash and scrap."

"But why, WHY?"

"You're frightfully thick-witted, Dan. Paper I signed was dated *before* the fire. So, it wasn't a British subject's property the mob burned. It was French property. Showing the stinkers are impartial, arson to the right of you, arson to the left of you, not favoring France at all.

"What you signed tends to show your interests are so well protected that your lease has an actual value. If it hadn't such a value, if your rights were so infringed on as to make it useless, you'd've had to abandon the property. And Lecoin could have got it free, gratis, without paying an anna. You and I have made, on paper, a very neat case for King Thebaw's government in regard to the way it treats foreigners other than French."

"Wonder if Lecoin had your factory set afire so you'd sign over without his having to get as rough with you as he did with me?"

"Quite possible. Though that bit of arson must've been planned in advance, just like the burning of the jail. He told us trouble was brewing, and Diane and I had better be away from home. This after the factory was ablaze. He didn't suspect until the jail delivery was nicely underway that you'd had a hand in *that*. Ha! Burned us out because of general notion you were spying,

and I working with you—rest was probably improvised."

"We know what happened, and never mind the logic of it. What's the signed and sealed paper say?"

"Lecoin is to get the ruby mines concession at Mogok. A French firm is to have a monopoly on the river boat business. And they'll build a railroad to Mandalay. Which would kill the Irrawaddi Flotilla Company totally."

"How about the teak concessions owned by British, Americans, Italians, Germans?"

"Burma's to be all French, and Mandalay a new Paris. We're in their Versailles-in-Asia. But wait! Guns are coming from French Indo China, and troops, too. To make Thebaw power-drunk, so he'll drive us out of Lower Burma too. Thebaw, catspaw for France—France playing innocent all the while, and all the while getting ready to drive us out of Rangoon, get a foothold near India."

"The hell you say!"

"Can't make anything else out of it. And they believe they can do it. Since we've not avenged Chinese Gordon, most disgraceful mess since Isandhlwana, Majuba Hill, and the murder of Sir Louis in Kabul, they fancy they can arm Thebaw's forces with up-to-date guns, and we'll continue being conciliatory—peace at any price. God blast it, we've been asking for this for years, we deserve it!"

"That's going a lot beyond any consul's conniving."

"Consul, my eye! The French prime minister—that Jules Ferry—this is national policy, they're doing everything they solemnly promised us at top level they had no intent of doing. Just as they have been cooking up trouble for us in the Soudan."

Kirby grabbed the paper, slapped it against the palm of his left hand. "Fistful of war, Alex! Gordon was only one white man, wiped out with a couple thousand colored troops. In the other messes, nothing but British troops cut up, and soldiers are cheap as dirt. British trade didn't suffer, none was involved, so on one in London gave a damn. But this—this'll affect business, and watch for the explosion. When the news gets to Rangoon."

"Who'll take it to Rangoon?"

Kirby pulled a long face. "You and I were to be hostages, each for the other. But if we both leave, there's Diane—"

"She'll be safe enough. He's a politician, not a monster. Once you and I are gone, he can't be telling us what'll happen to her if we don't behave."

"Devil take the *telling*. It's the doing."

"A threat is no good unless there is someone to hear it. The actual doing her harm after we're gone would be pointless."

"She's your daughter—I don't like it."

"Lecoin's a scoundrel from patriotic motives. He's not a blood-drinker by taste. Fact is, I am more worried about Shwe Tha, he might be murdered, monastery or no. And if there's to be war, he is the one man we'll need to restore order when the smoke clears away."

"I see your argument, only it gags me."

"You're quite too romantic. Afraid Diane'll hold it against you for leaving her here, while you hustle a treaty to Rangoon. She's quite as capable of taking care of herself as ever her late mother was. Don't be an ass."

"You make it awfully simple. Ma Khin, how does it look for us to get out now, we can't wait."

XII

MA KHIN was not offended by such impatience. It merely puzzled her. Fenton said, "Even if we could wait, I'm quite too large to impersonate a Burmese soldier. Loom up like an elephant—ha! Suppose we stole one of His Majesty's brutes, and I hid myself in the basket of a 'traveller.' You can handle the beasts, you be the mahout. Audacity, you know. Ride out in broad daylight—what officer of the guard would be silly enough to question?"

Kirby shook his head. "I've doctored elephants. Yes, and in my headquarters camp was one I could handle. But a strange one, no."

This annoyed Fenton. "When I was in the Soudan, back in '64, I had no trouble at all with a strange camel. Rode sixty miles the first day. I am sure you could manage a strange elephant if you tried."

"Why the hell don't *you* try it, then?" Kirby retorted. "But your idea of going out grandly has something."

"We can't mount an *idea*."

"Of course we can!" Kirby came to his feet with a bound. "Elephant—conspicuous. Sneak out, you're caught. Bold move—well, you're too big to hide, so, stalk out in full view."

"With hat, stick, and gloves, doubtless?" Fenton said, sarcastically. "Special dispensation from King Thebaw. But barefooted."

Kirby ignored the heavy irony. "Ma Khin, can you write?"

"Oh, yes, a better hand than either of my brothers."

In almost every other Asiatic country, Kirby could have counted on such widespread illiteracy that faking a few lines of script would have served his purpose. In Burma, however, every boy spent a certain while in a monastery, as a neophyte, during which time the monks taught him to read and write. And literate women, though uncommon, were far from a rarity.

"I'll get that inkwell."

Ma Khin objected, "They may be looking for you. I'll go."

When she had left, Fenton asked, "What sort of *billet doux* is she to write."

"Something alongside the official chop will do the trick. I hope your nerves are steady."

"Won't be if I'm cooped in here much longer. Claustrophobia. I get frightfully uneasy, wondering how I'd fare if an earthquake shook this blasted masonry to pieces before I could roll out."

"Good rousing earthquake would start a fine panic, we'd have no problem at all."

"I loathe earthquakes. See here, is Ma Khin going to forge an order you can present at the stables to get an elephant and mahout?"

"Might work," Kirby answered, evasively. "Leaving with no fuss at all, we could get Diane out of the consulate, and I'd feel better."

"Utterly insane, thinking of being burdened by a woman," Fenton grumbled. "In a country filthy with *dacoits*. Only reason I'm risking it is I've got to get out. Your shooting those spotted devils put my neck on the block as well as your own. You'll probably insist on taking Ma Khin along."

"Have to. She's playing a dangerous game. Once we get this treaty to Rangoon, and things begin popping, the kill-the-foreigners-clique will start murdering all Shwe Tha's friends they can get hold of. There'll be hell in Mandalay for every native friend we have."

And then Ma Khin returned with the writing kit. Kirby dictated. She said, "Let me pick the words that mean what you say. In court language." She added, in merry malice, *"Hok de?"*

He watched her shape the Pali script, each character a combination of circles and arcs; Sanskirt done over in curves. When the last flourish was made, she said, "There! Like an official scribe."

"Beautiful!"

Fenton brightened. "I saw, now. And the chop mark on the treaty does make the script look official."

"But I can't get uniforms tonight," Ma Khin said.

"Tonight," Kirby declared, "we are leaving. There has been no search, and that is what worries me."

"That's simple," Ma Khin explained. "The one who ran away, maybe he couldn't run far."

"Just as I said!" Fenton cut in. "When I was in Pegu—"

"Let's hear what *she* says."

Ma Khin resumed, "Shooting in the palace is very bad, nobody who did it, no matter who was near it, nobody is innocent, everyone is under suspicion. So, if the running away man didn't die quickly, the Pangyet Wun maybe killed him, with something not making noise. Then nobody talks. And only two spotted men dead. Maybe the bodies are hidden now. Then, Lecoin says nothing, the Pangyet Wun says nothing, nobody says a thing. You do not understand the suspicion in court, nobody can understand, without living in it."

Kirby pinched out the taper. "Ma Khin, I hope you won't mind tearing strips from your *tamein*. All you can spare. We'll need it. And we'll need you as well. If you're not afraid."

"I'm not afraid, but why?"

"You're going to be a soldier. Bit undersized for a 'blood-drinker', but you'll do. And the soldier whose uniform you'll wear will of course be fit to be tied, so we'll tie him."

Ma Khin, though she went wide eyed, decided she'd try anything once.

"Alex, you keep out of sight," Kirby

directed, as he led off, with Ma Khin following.

When they came to the pavilion of the Lord White Elephant, Kirby was within reach of enough uniforms to outfit a company. A hundred soldiers guarded him, day and night. Thirty men waited on the divine beast, among them a *min-gyi*, a Minister of State, who managed his affairs and those of the province whose revenues were assigned to the godlike creature.

Daily, he was bathed in sandal scented water. He drank from a golden vessel. The Sinbyudaw, the Lord of All Elephants, rated two white parasols and four golden ones. King Thebaw himself had nine white ones. No other man in the land was allowed even one, not even an heir to the throne. Death, on the spot, would be the penalty for whoever assumed a divine prerogative.

Dancers performed before the Lord White Elephant. Singers lulled him to sleep. Despite all this, he was an evil tempered beast, and dangerous. While in an uncommonly surly mood, he had killed one man who had come too near him.

This was the divinity against whose guard of honor Kirby had made a plan. He preferred not to think of the penalty of failure. But at the last moment, he weakened, for Ma Khin, however reasonable, was nevertheless Burmese: and if she faltered, they were doomed.

"*Teit tin,*" he said, "can I count on you? You're not afraid?"

"We are not going to touch the Sinbyudaw," she answered. "A soldier is only a man, and his clothes are only a man's clothes."

"I kowtow with my forehead."

Then he took off his sash, and knotted an egg sized rock into it, covering it with layers of cloth so that would be shock without fracture.

Quite the grand lady, Ma Khin approached the red and gold pavilion of the Sinbyudaw. Not even when guard of honor to a god could any Burmese soldier do a military sentry go, or refrain from quitting his post without proper relief. There was no Prussianism in Burma.

A MURKY light made the shadows at the entrance dance and shift. Wicks floated in small bowls of crude petroleum, dipped from the wells of Yenangaung. But there was light enough to make it plain that Ma Khin's *tamein* had been woven for royalty, worn once, perhaps by the Supaya-lat herself, and then given away. Thebaw's queen never wore any garment a second time. Thus when Ma Khin beckoned, and spoke to the most nearly alert sentry in the form prescribed at court for addressing the enormously inferior, he made a ceremonious *shikoh*.

Ma Khin fingered several of the gold pieces Kirby had given her. She did this to make a small, sweet sound to tickle the ear. At her gesture, the soldier approached.

"There was shooting not long ago. True, not true?"

"This person did not hear."

Whether he had or had not heard, his answer was only to have been expected; no one in his right mind would have given any other. Ma Khin glanced right, left, with alertness which suggested anxiety under the surface, insofar as any well bred person might be anxious. "No matter, *hnin*. There are things best carried away by night. Wrapped up and carried away. And a silent man never has his tongue cut out for too much talking."

She drew dainty finger tips over the sovereigns gleaming in the palm of her left hand. She closed the hand, after the man had filled his eyes, then squinted avariciously.

"One other man to help you. Don't talk. There must not be more than one other. Let nobody else know. You two will get much merit by earning a gold piece to give to the Divine Elephant. You'll not be gone more than an hour."

"Is it in a red velvet bag?"

The soldier referred to the court custom of putting the corpse of murdered prince or princess into a bag made of that peculiar red velvet which only royalty might use. Only until thus sacked was the body flung into the river.

"The less you think of color, the better." She turned, and minced regally toward the shadows. "Bring your guns to make a stretcher. Hurry, fool!"

Yet she took her time, so as not to be lost in shadow before the soldiers could overtake her.

Ma Khin was little past the pavilion's

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corner when the two caught up, and respectfully trailed after her.

Kirby, crouching in darkness, feared that the path he had chosen as amply shaded was actually too bright, for moonlight did reach down through the leaves. It occurred to him that a musket clattering to the ground might arouse other guards. By the time he had reviewed every one of the thousand mishaps he had not foreseen in his planning, Ma Khin was abreast of him. She stopped abruptly. She gestured toward Kirby's shadow. She exclaimed in annoyance when her several gold pieces tinkled to the pavement.

The soldiers, eager for a feel of their reward, scrambled to gather the money.

Kirby moved in long, springy strides. He had been worrying about those stiff legs. Now their smoothness amazed him. He flicked his blackjack. And, absurdly, wondered if he had struck hard enough.

Whop. Being already on hands and knees, the soldier merely slumped. His comrade, eagerly gleaning, twisted his head. That move did not spoil Kirby's aim. Another whisk and a pop. They were out, and Kirby was hustling the first slugged into the shadows beside the path.

"Now those strips of your *tamein,*" he whispered. "While I get into this lad's uniform."

The change was quickly made. When he had peeled the second soldier, he was ready to tie and gag the first. This busied him while Ma Khin got into the second soldier's uniform.

Too much tunic, too much trousers, not enough girl; but a good fit, in Thebaw's army, would have been unnatural.

Kirby and Ma Khin put on the spiked helmets and eyed each other. "We don't look a bit sloppier than the other guards," he said, "and don't worry whether you'll be awkward shouldering a gun. Couldn't be more so than these chaps. Let's go."

MA KHIN however paused to pick up the coins she had scattered. She gave all but two back to Kirby. These she laid on the ground one beside each gagged soldier.

"It would be very bad," she said, looking up to regard him with wide and serious

eyes, "to cheat the Divine Elephant's guards."

She meant it. She was being very scrupulous. Kirby wanted to laugh with sheer delight. Instead, he caught that half-pint-sized lady, raised her to her tiptoes, and kissed her soundly. "Ma Khin, if you only knew what a prize you are!"

She blinked, grimaced, and looked up again when he let go of her.

"I have heard of that custom. I am not quite sure—well—"

"One more lesson, and you're qualified," Kirby said, as he finally turned to pick up the muskets.

When they joined Fenton, more of Ma Khin's *tamein* went to lash his hands behind him.

"Not so tightly," he grumbled. "If you're shot or cut down, I'd be left quite helpless. Want to raise a hand in self defense, no matter how little good it'd do."

With bayonets fixed, they marched Fenton toward the guards at the inner gate. A sentry challenged. Kirby presented the French-Burmese treaty, folded so that the official "chop" showed conspicuously. An officer came from the guardhouse.

"What's this, what's this?" he growled. officiously.

Ma Khin, face in shadow, spoke for Kirby. "There is writing, O Blood Drinker! We do what is ordered for this foreign animal."

And when the captain said, "Pass on!" Kirby could not believe that it had been so easy. Nor was there any greater difficulty at the outer gate, nor at the accursed gate of corpses.

"How much longer do I have my hands tied?" Fenton demanded, when he had the moat behind him. "And must you jog me with your blasted bayonets?"

"Wouldn't have looked natural if we hadn't. Don't worry, you'll be able to sit a pony."

"What pony? Where?"

"Lecoin's ponies, or the French consul's. We can't risk trying for yours, and it's a cinch we can't walk barefooted all the way to Rangoon."

(*To be concluded in next* SHORT STORIES)

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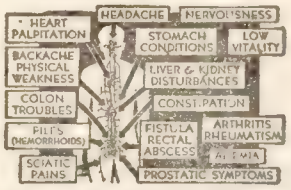

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The Story Tellers' Circle

How Burma Got That Way

AFTER writing a good-sized serial like "The Road to Mandalay" we'd think that its author would be temporarily out of words. To prove that such is not the case and that the author in question is a fellow of no ordinary talents we hereby bow low to E. Hoffmann Price and present these following paragraphs from him. Ed Price is a quick and good man with these background notes; he likes to write them (so he says) and we, and you, like to read 'em.

We are always inclined to think that a good deal of history is written before it happens by writers like Ed Price who knows intimately many of the exotic and out-of-the-way locales of this fretful old world. And we think SHORT STORIES gets more than its share of these "things to come." But now on to Lower Burma:

"We have, over the years, become accustomed to picturing the imperialistic British taking over one Asiatic country after the other, with a fine assumption of superiority over the natives; it is eye-opening to look at the record and note the arrogance and offensiveness with which the British traders and political representatives were treated by the Burmese. British envoys had to be bareheaded and barefooted when entering the palace precincts, and when abroad in Mandalay, had to kneel in mud or in dust, according to the season, when a native dignitary and his entourage passed by. And if

this obeissance were not made promptly enough, the 'foreign barbarian' got a slash with a whip, to teach him manners. This state of affairs endured from the very beginning of Burmese-British relationships, eased up decently enough during the reign of Mindon Min, and became worse during the reign of King Thebaw; and Thebaw, as our story suggests, went a bit too far, whereat the long-suffering British tackling dummy hit back.

"I have taken no license with history in my references to the ragtag army, the comic opera army with which in his ignorance and arrogance Thebaw hoped to drive the British out of Lower Burma, which they had annexed only after aggression by kings with delusions of grandeur. And I have not caricatured Thebaw in my presentation of him as being entirely convinced that he was the Center of the Universe; he was playing true to form.

"The Burmese mind is a collection of contradictions: ancient superstitions connected with the propitiating of nats, *even by human sacrifice, existed along with the Buddhist observance of* ahimsa, *'harmlessness', refraining from taking the life of any creature whatsoever. Only the lowest of men were sufficiently reckless to court a million years in the eighth and nethermost hell because of being hunters; fishermen were only a bracket above hunters, though it was argued that the fisherman did not kill the fish, he merely removed the creature from the water, and it was not his fault if it perished. This logic doubtless derived from the Burmese love for sauces of processed fish, the higher the reek, the more highly esteemed.*

"My aim has been to present an honest picture of Burma of 1885, insofar as the requirements of modern story telling permit: inevitably, I have had to ignore many shadings, and a few facts of such nature that including them to give a fully balanced presentation would have demanded a good deal of space for explanation, or documentation to make them credible. But nowhere have I knowingly described a motive or depicted a situation or action which is without precedent, in the Burmese pattern.

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permanently decorated with certain magical designs would make them invulnerable. Poor marksmanship and worse firearms naturally fostered this delusion. The reaction of Lecoin's men when Kirby continued advancing in the face of pistol fire is entirely consistent with the belief that a man can by magic become invulnerable, and hence is one to avoid in combat.

"Ma Khin's association with Kirby is merely an example of the freedom enjoyed by Burmese women of that day, and of today: of all Asiatic women, they have always been the most 'emancipated.' Her tragic end, by the way, is based on an actual case some months after the dethroning of Thebaw, when British troops ranged the land, suppressing outbreaks of banditry: a Burmese girl, wearing man's clothes, and carrying a sword, was cut down in an assault at dawn, on an outlaw rendezvous. She had followed her lover to a finish; he also fell in action.

"Despite the fact that a monastery is universally considered as a sanctuary wherein a fugitive may not be molested, dacoit *bands have attacked foreigners who had taken shelter in a monastery; the closing episode of my story is, I grant, a divergence from ordinary practice, yet not, under the circumstances in Mandalay, something too freakish for honest story telling.*

"I have over-simplified my statement of French imperialism, and French plans against the British in Lower Burma; but there is no essential incorrectness—another case of inevitable omissions. The only unfairness, and I regret this, lies in my not having had the space at my command to allow for the presentation of this fact, that an appreciable number of the French residents of Mandalay were right-minded men, tending to their private business; men who were deservedly esteemed by all other Europeans, including the harassed British. This is brought out in the memoirs of an Englishman who witnessed the Third Burmese War, as well as prelude and aftermath; he wrote under the name of 'Shwe Yoe.' Sir Herbert Thirkell-White, who came to Burma before Thebaw's time, and spent thirty years there, makes similar right-minded acknowledgement in favor of several French gentlemen resident in the capital.

"San Ya, the embezzler, is based on an

actual character described by Sir Herbert, whose memoirs contributed so much to the framework of this narrative, as also did Shwe Yoe's account. And alchemy, believe it or not, was a mania in Burma. The recipe I give for making gold is one held in those days to be sure-fire. If any of you want to try it, I wish you luck, and I'll not ask for a divvy. But when you cook off your second batch, I'd very much appreciate a chance to watch.

"As far as I know, the Supaya-lat did not actually force one of Thebaw's ministers to put on a woman's skirt; but she did grossly affront a peace-advocating dignitary by screaming that he should wear a tamein, *like the woman that he was! Shwe Tha is a fictitious character patterned after an actual minister who did his best to prevent war.*

" 'Supaya-lat' is not a proper name, but a title; and as far as I can check, 'Thebaw' is not a proper name, but a designation which indicates that he was prince of the Hsi-paw province before his accession to the throne. Surnames do not exist in Burmese, and the use of the 'Christian' name, even among commoners, is highly discourteous, unless an honorific is used along with the name. So, 'the Supaya-lat' would be used, rather than her actual name. With respect to other characters in my story, I have dropped the honorific 'U' ('venerable' 'old' in the complimentary Chinese sense) to avoid annoying the reader by the constant use of 'U Shwe Tha,' 'U San Ya,' and the like. On the other hand, 'Ma Khin' means merely, 'Miss or Madame Khin'—handy, and so, why not be correct and observe Burmese etiquette?

"Come to think of it, I am NOT supposed to write a monograph on Burma. I hope, however, that these remarks anticipate queries and doubts, and answer them; and if you have been left in a whirl of elephants, golden parasols, pagodas, and pongyis, *I hope it is a pleasant dizziness!"*

E. Hoffmann Price.

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SAVINGS BONDS

Perry's best plots deal not primarily with spys and gangsters, but, as we said before, with the real underworld—caves!

This cave business is called—it says here—speleology, an unlikely word for anybody but a scientist, a troglodyte—go on, we dare you, look it up!—or a speleologist! This past summer Clay Perry has been on the air with his cave activities from the new televsion station, WRGB, in Schenectady. Perry, who's coming up with his third cave book, also finds time to lecture, attend cave conventions, and do us stories like "Convict Cave."

Ring In the New—Not Just Yet!

MALCOLM MURCHIE'S good Series baseball piece, "Now Batting for the Broncos. . . ." makes a point that has been most effectively demonstrated in the diamond season just concluding.

His Rooster Evans—and those of us who've followed the game have known dozens of Roosters—is typical of the aging ballplayer, eyes dimmed, a step slower, the old zing gone from the arm.

The emphasis today in so many businesses, of which ballplaying is just one, is on youth and more youth. Sports writers covering the hot dog-and-peanuts circuit this season were unanimous in hailing as tops that great collection of young arms and legs otherwise known as the Brooklyn Dodgers. Yet, after fighting their way from last to first in the National, the Brooks took one of most precipitous Brophys in the history of the game. Teams relegated to the lower stratas began to thump the Flatbush Youth Movement with painful regularity.

When it came down to the stretch drive in September the young arms and legs were no match for the ring-wise veterans who had on their side the experience that comes only with age.

We are reminded of a remark attributed to the immortal Tris Speaker when, in his travels, an eager bush manager was parading the local phenom before him. This 17-year-old youngster was a shortstop and his manager raved about him. Finally, piqued by Speaker's silence the pilot put it to him.

"All right, what does he lack, huh? I say he's got everything. Size, speed, stuff, whaddya want? What's missing?"

Tris Speaker's reply was there. "What does he lack?" the master answered. "Just a few years."

So it is. The clubs that whipped past Brooklyn at the end had those Rooster Evans guys playing for them. Not so fast in the legs maybe, but plenty swift up here in the head.

Someday these youth movement clubs will grow up. And they'll be mighty good. But it's best to remember what Tris Speaker said. Besides legs and arms it takes something else; it takes "a few years."

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